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First Volumes

GOD WITHOUT THUNDER
JOHN CROWE RANSOM

H. G. WELLS
GEOFFREY WEST

WALTHER RATHENAU
COUNT HARRY KESSLER

THE PROSPECTS OF HUMANISM
LAWRENCE HYDE

THE LIFE OF ANNIE BESANT
GEOFFREY WEST

LONDON : GERALD HOWE

THE LIFE OF ANNIE BESANT

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PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

WHEN, EARLY IN 1929, I wrote of Annie Besant as probably still rising towards the climax of her dramatic career, few, and certainly not she herself, could have suspected how little of time and activity remained to her. Her recovery from the illness of the previous summer seemed complete. She made her usual trip to Europe, lectured at the Queen's Hall in June, crossed the Atlantic to Chicago for the Theosophical Society's World Congress in July, and was in Europe again for the annual Ommen Star Camp gathering in August. Reaching India towards the end of October she gave a series of political lectures reiterating her demand for Dominion Status. In 1930 she again triumphantly visited Europe, accompanied by Leadbeater, Wedgwood, and others, attending the Geneva Congress of the Federation of European Theosophical Societies and the Ommen Camp. As usual, but now for the last time, she was in London for her birthday.

At Ommen, and elsewhere, she and Krishnamurti appeared as ever side by side, speaking from the same platform. But even their most devoted followers knew now that all was not well between them. Perhaps the rift began with the public appointment of the twelve apostles of the World Teacher in 1925, but it first became visible when in 1927 Krishnamurti explicitly renounced all organized and dogmatic religion, persisting in his attitude to the extent of dissolving, as its Head, the Order of the Star which Mrs Besant had built up over so many years to serve him. The questions put to her at the Chicago World Congress in 1929 showed clearly the disquietude of Theosophist members at his repeated contradiction of the Society's general teachings and its marked ritualistic tendency. Her answers suggested a rather curious attitude of submission without surrender. 'I am his inferior,' she acknowledged, 'and where I do not understand, I suspend my judgment, hoping to

grow into understanding. I cannot pour out Life as he pours it out. I can only help the Life that is being poured out to be embodied in new forms'—a dubious service, perhaps, to one so specifically concerned to deny the validity of forms! Some of her colleagues expressed more openly their rather impatient hope that he would soon reach the end of this youthful phase of 'iconoclasm' and return to orthodoxy. Meanwhile, however, the Eastern School (the old Esoteric Section) was suspended, little was heard of the World Mother Movement, and even the Liberal Catholic Church seemed very retiring. At the same time there was a definite move to set Mrs Besant—who more than acquiesced—beside, if not above, Madame Blavatsky, as the prime instrument of esoteric Theosophical endeavour. In politics, it was certainly a blow that she received no invitation to attend the Indian Round Table Conference in any capacity.

Early in 1931 it was announced that her health would not permit her to leave Adyar that year, and a fall, towards the summer, resulted in definite illness. After a slow recovery, came relapse. Towards the end of the year her death was actually reported in America, and she was at least near enough to it to declare her work in this life over. Practically there was no change throughout 1932, or indeed until the further serious collapse of March 1933. She lived in unbroken retirement, with failing strength, and, it was declared, aloof from outside interests. She no longer desired to follow the events of the world. Her work in this life was done; she was, in ever completer withdrawal even from her closest colleagues, just awaiting her Master's call. Yet even so, she could not, she did not, really relinquish her 'quenchless feud,' looking forward to her 'passing over' only that, Jinarajadasa reported, she might make swift return to this earth in an Indian body, to take up again with renewed vigour and effectiveness her work for India and Truth. . . .

G. W.

PREFACE

THIS BIOGRAPHY of one of the most remarkable figures of the last eighty years—one of those who occasionally emerge to typify a period by running counter to all its beliefs and prejudices—is a full-length portrait for which my study published in 1927 was but the first brief sketch. Here is more than expansion; this is a new work, newly written, and with the addition of much essential material. The small book, less than a third the present length, seems to me to stand as an outline; what follows is a full and fully documented survey—the first, apparently, to be published in any country. Mrs Besant's life has been one of stormy controversies some of which may be regarded with almost historical detachment, while to some we are still too near; in neither case has it been the business of this biography to take sides. My intention has been neither more nor less than to examine and portray a distinctive personality in an account of her life. That it must be regarded as an account, not the account, I fully recognize; perspective is the prerogative of the future, and in dealing with contemporary events, and with men and women still living, one is forced to be tentative rather than final.

In gathering my material I have refrained deliberately from approaching Mrs Besant's friends and fellow-workers. Devoting her life to that most controversial of subjects, Truth, she has paid the penalty of partiality, and her comrades are necessarily partisans, even when no longer on the same side. Reminiscence, under such circumstances, is too fallible, and it has seemed to me safer to keep to the printed records of the day; a certain degree of quotation has, in consequence, proved itself essential to my method. Sources are acknowledged

in footnotes and the bibliography. To this, however, there is one exception: every quoted passage, the source of which is neither given nor obvious, may be attributed to Mrs Besant's *Autobiography*.

For permission freely and generously given to quote from various books and pamphlets I have to thank especially Mrs Besant herself (her writings generally), Messrs Ernest Benn Ltd and T. Fisher Unwin Ltd (her *Autobiography*), Messrs The Theosophical Publishing House Ltd (numerous publications), and Lady Stephen and Messrs Constable and Co Ltd (*Emily Davies and Girton College*). I wish also to make acknowledgements to all the other authors and publishers whose books are referred to in footnotes and in the bibliography, but especially to Messrs T. C. & E. C. Jack (*Theosophy*), Messrs G. P. Putnam's Sons (*India: Bond or Free?*), and Messrs E. P. Dutton & Co (*The Theosophical Movement*).

My more personal gratitude is due to Mr S. K. Ratcliffe for the loan of certain papers, and for helpful comments and advice; to my friend Mr Jack C. Turner for reading the manuscript and making a number of useful suggestions, mainly of a literary nature; and to my wife for her continuous and very practical assistance at every stage from the earliest to the last. Finally, and in particular, I wish to thank my friend Mr Basil P. Howell for his unfailing and refreshing interest, for the correction or verification of numerous points of fact, for supplying me with innumerable books, pamphlets, and other papers, and, not least, for providing the interesting photograph of Mrs Besant at the age of eighteen. Without his assistance my labours would have been doubled, and the result, I feel bound to say, far less satisfactory.

GEOFFREY WEST

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AFFECTIONATELY

TO

RALPH STRAUS

FRIENDLIEST OF CRITICS

MOST CRITICAL OF FRIENDS

PROLOGUE

THE LIFE-STORY of Mrs Annie Besant is much more than the story of an individual life. She has been always not only a personality but also a portent ; she has lived more publicly than privately. For any full understanding she must necessarily be set against the background of her times, if not of eighty years then of the half-century which has passed since in the middle seventies she burst upon a promptly agitated and apprehensive world. Burst—that is certainly the effect, but not at all like a bombshell, for a bomb, bursting, has done with it ; its moment of greatest power and achievement is the moment in which it announces itself, whereas Mrs Besant's whole career has been a series of explosions of increasing force and effectiveness. The metaphor which comes much more aptly to mind is that of an express train speeding irresistibly on, a headlong progress continued day after day, year after year, decade after decade with ever-gathering momentum. There has been slackening of speed at no station, junction, nor warning signal, and the plaints of the gasping passengers whirled breathless in her wake have been altogether ignored. Carriages have been slipped off at one point, caught on at another, here the fireman tossed out, there the guard, and substitutes picked up in passing like mail-bags. The traversed landscape seems, as one looks back upon it, littered with the discarded coaches of Christianity, Marriage, Freethought, Malthusianism, Radicalism, Democracy, Republicanism, Trade Unionism, Fabianism, Atheism, not to mention the private vehicles of any

number of individuals. To-day her load is heavier than ever before—Theosophy, Indian Education, Indian Nationalism, the World Teacher, the New Civilisation; we catch only the more prominent names as she goes flashing past us—yet there is no pause in the engine's steady working, no loss of power, and not even now, after eighty years, any suggestion of respite or of a final destination sighted. Her Theosophical labours may seem to be working to a climax, but even the coming of the World Teacher can mark only a crest looking forward to new and wider horizons, and as these words are written she is taking up once more with renewed vigour the fight for Indian Home Rule.

Here, however briefly glimpsed, we scan a background which includes many movements of modern thought, not a little of politics, much of religion, and spans not the years only but half a world. It reaches back to those dear domestic days of the sixties, when the general attitude towards women was that cheerfully summed up in two sentences taken from a contemporary article: 'No woman ought to be encouraged in the belief that she has separate interests or separate duties. God and Nature have merged her existence in that of her husband.' It brings us, as we traverse it, into the heart of Bradlaugh's secularist and radical campaigns of the seventies, and of the beginnings of the modern birth-control movement; into contact with the Socialism of the eighties, then in this country but newly self-conscious and fighting its first active battle; behind the scenes of the most serious and most successful of all modern attempts to establish a new religion; and, finally, upon the stage of the struggle, still in progress, for Indian Self-Government. In these alarums and excursions she fought, if never alone, always as a pioneer, and time, at least where all but the two last are concerned, has justified her. She strove, we see clearly enough to-day, on the side of the

angels, and she was heartily damned in consequence—by the godly most heartily of all.

For this she herself cannot be held perhaps wholly free from blame. It has been said by those who know her and have worked with her that of two methods of achieving an object she will inevitably take the more difficult and combative. That has always been her way. In the eighties, as a Fabian, a member of the London School Board, and even as a Theosophist, she affronted the sensibilities of many by her working-class dress, her heavy, laced boots, short skirts, red neckerchief, and close-cut hair. And it would not be difficult—though certainly unfair and inaccurate—to portray her life simply as a continuous process of ' looking for trouble '. She joined forces with Bradlaugh at a time when he had to warn her that she would pay heavily for any friendship extended to him. Ten years later he had won through to a wide acceptance not only of many of his views but also of himself ; she left him to take up the newer cause of Socialism. She became for the Fabian Society, Shaw has said, ' a sort of expeditionary force, always to the front when there was trouble and danger '. Fabianism was just becoming respectable when she appeared suddenly in the camp of Theosophy. To show that her later career has been no more settled, one need only mention (to point to matters later pages must record, and in addition to her numerous Theosophical ' expeditionary forces ') the Judge trouble of the middle nineties, the Leadbeater scandals of 1906–7–8, the announcement in 1908 of the coming of a World Teacher, her adoption of Krishnamurti, the founding of the Indian Home Rule League, her internment in 1917, her triumph as President of the Indian National Congress (which in the following year howled her from its platform), and quite lately her definite announcement that the World Teacher is actually living in this world and has upon several

occasions used the body of Krishnamurti as his 'vehicle'. Here indeed is matter, if not for a dozen volumes, at least for one.

That Mrs Besant is among the most remarkable of living women cannot be gainsaid. But she is more than remarkable—she is also significant. It is not only that her sufferings and victories of forty and fifty years ago were the birth-pangs wherein an attitude essentially modern was shaped and produced, an attitude more tolerant and understanding, expressing itself in a concern with the spirit rather than the letter of belief, more human if sometimes less humane, and taking a broader and profounder if more bewildered view. That she has helped to form the present—that is not all. Her significance goes deeper. The essential fact about her is that she has been from first to last a religious adventurer, a spiritual pilgrim. Her progress in this respect has been still more essentially modern, most of all perhaps in what may prove to have been her failure, final and irretrievable.

But all this apart, her story can, I think, be told for its own sake. A historian commented recently upon the advantage which the novelist, who at least is free to make his characters probable, enjoys over the biographer, who has to do what he can with the facts. For these very reasons would my choice be given to biography; the novelist is confined to probability—it is the biographer who is free. Let him be sure of his names, his dates, his places, let him marshal his authorities, and credibility matters little. The lives of all great men and women have been incredible, Shakespeare's so much so that worthy men choose to spend their lives proving his impossible. But look upon this picture, and on this—on one hand the country clergyman's wife, an attractive, handsome, unhappy girl struggling fearfully against her first timid doubts: on the other a leader of Indian national politics, president and autocratic director of the

world-wide activities of a new and prosperous religion, a white-haired, upright figure of striking dignity, eighty years of age yet still in the full vigour of life, proclaiming to all men with the perfect serenity of an assured knowledge the coming, promised to her by Himself in person, of the World Teacher, the Christ, and being followed in her faith by tens—and increasing tens—of thousands. As novelist, not for one moment could I hope to bridge the gap between with anything like the variety or inherent plausibility of the actual circumstances. As biographer I can at least, should probability fail, always take refuge behind my authorities. The life of Mrs Besant, in short, has been one of those adventures much too strange not to be true.

Most people in this world seem to live 'in character'; they have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and the three are congruous one with another and true to the rules of their type.

H. G. Wells

1

UPON THE THRESHOLD

I

FOR MANY YEARS, I believe, Mrs Besant has denied the possibility of more than purely physical heredity, but one may be excused for feeling that the evidence is against her. Annie Wood was born essentially of the middle classes. In a peculiar sense the world was all before her where to choose ; judging simply by the fates of other near relatives, it seemed that either the highest or lowest of positions might be hers. The general circumstances of the two families (her father's and mother's) in the few decades preceding her birth were significant of the changing social conditions of the nineteenth century. The Woods were a family, once of some note in Devonshire and Cornwall, which had suffered a process of decay during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and was now slowly waking to new life. Of this particular branch, settled in the neighbourhood of Tiverton, some were farmers ; others, presumably younger sons for whom there was no place at home, had been reduced much more speedily to poverty. One, struggling to make a living as a serge-manufacturer in the reign of Queen Anne, was so poor save in progeny that he had to seek aid to support his ten children. Yet even here the darkest hour presaged the dawn—his grandson Matthew, born in 1768, was to take his place, modestly but effectively, in English history.

Matthew Wood might well be acclaimed as the type of the Industrious Apprentice. He was educated at the Tiverton free grammar school, left at an early age to help his father, and at fourteen was apprenticed to his cousin,

an Exeter tea and hop merchant. By 1796 he had set up for himself in London as a hop dealer, and was able to marry. In 1801 he became Common Councilman for Cripplegate, Alderman six years later, and in 1815 Lord Mayor, an honour again awarded him in the following year. In 1817 he was elected as one of the four parliamentary representatives of the City of London, and sat continuously in the House of Commons until his death in 1844. For the last forty years of his life he was a man of considerable wealth, but never lost his interest in the poor, for whose good he continually strove ; he sat in the House as a Liberal, but some even of his own party deplored his radical tendencies. As Lord Mayor he strove energetically to improve the conditions and discipline of the London police, and to prohibit the grosser immoralities of the city streets. In the House of Commons he spoke frequently, opposing the Corn Laws and Test and Corporation Acts, and supporting in the interests of toleration and justice both Roman Catholic Emancipation and Parliamentary Reform. He was interested in prison reform and diligent in upholding the rights of working-men ; he appears to have been popular with both the public and his colleagues in the House.

These were his most useful services ; his better remembered may be briefly referred to. With Lord Darnley he had undertaken to set in order the somewhat involved affairs of the Duke of Kent, the latter retiring with his Duchess to ' manage ' upon a small income in Brussels and the trustees receiving meanwhile the bulk of his revenues and dealing with his creditors. In 1818 came the news that the Duchess was pregnant, and, at Matthew Wood's suggestion and largely by his efforts, a sum of money was raised that the noble couple might without fear of insult to their royal dignity journey immediately to England. The child of the Duke and

Duchess, when at last she became Queen Victoria, bestowed one of her earliest honours upon the man to whom, she was told, she owed her English birth; he became a baronet in 1837.* In 1820, again, he was foremost in urging Queen Caroline to visit London. He met her in France—one of his sons was in her suite—and accompanied her in her triumphant progress from Dover to London. Each day he appeared with her when she drove out to receive the people's applause, and he was prominent in defending her against the accusations of her virtuous husband, the most kingly of the Georges. For this he was attacked in a satirical pamphlet, *Tentamen; or, An Essay towards the History of Whittington, Some Time Lord Mayor of London* (1820), said to be by Theodore Hook. In 1821, accompanied by his son, he appeared in the last act of this unfortunate woman's tragedy—her funeral at Brunswick.

This son, one of three who grew to manhood, was the future Lord Hatherley, and he was, in later years, to exercise a direct influence upon the life of Annie Besant. He was born in 1801, educated at Winchester and abroad, returned to London in 1820, and in due course was called to the Bar. In 1848, though member of the House of Commons for the City of Oxford, he was still practically unknown. His abilities as a speaker, however, gained attention, and he became in 1851 Solicitor-General, in 1853 Vice-Chancellor, and in 1868 Lord Chancellor of England and Lord Hatherley. He, too, was a Liberal of distinctly radical tendencies, though a staunch Churchman, who devoted immense time and energy to preventing marriage with deceased wives' sisters. He died in 1881. A younger brother, Western Wood (1804–1863), was in later life a vigorous and

* It has been suggested more than once in print that this was chosen as an economical cancellation of the debt. In fact, the full sum was repaid before the Duke's death.

effective member of the House. Field-Marshal Sir Evelyn Wood and Mrs O'Shea, afterwards Mrs Parnell, were also members of the family, which exhibited, it is evident, no lack of enterprise in action, and in thought a tradition of widely liberal sympathies.

It was only the elder branch, to which Annie's father belonged (Hatherley was his second cousin), that had not done well, still clinging to the land. In that changing age those prospered who could accept new conditions, adapt themselves; the Woods in Devonshire had grown not richer but poorer, and her father and his brothers had to battle for education and a living. One at least prospered; another, after a period as store-keeper in a Portsmouth dockyard, emigrated to South Africa in still fruitless search for success.

William Burton Persse Wood, Annie's father, had an Irish mother; he was born in Galway about 1816 and educated at Trinity College, Dublin. He took a medical degree at Dublin University, and walked the hospitals there, but after fully qualifying as a doctor he was offered a good commercial position in London by a relative, accepted it, and never set up in regular practice. He was the eldest son, and when he came of age he and his father decided that pride of acres was, after all, very little compensation for a perpetually empty pocket, and joined together to cut off the entail and to sell the ancestral estates. Thus the family, wisely in its generation, cast away the last encumbering burden of property and decided to devote itself, whole-heartedly, to commerce in a commercial century.

If the Woods, as a family, could claim to be evidently once more in the ascendant, the Morrises (the name had been changed in the eighteenth century from its original form of Maurice) no less evidently could not. They were a family with a past which went back to 'the seven kings of France, the Milesian kings', and if all their glory

and prosperity were not quite so completely lost in the mists of antiquity as those legendary individuals—at whom Mrs Besant herself does not hesitate to mock, however gently—still, very little had endured even to the childhood of her mother. Emily Mary Roche Morris was but one—the second—of a family as large as it was poor, and she was early adopted by a maiden aunt, who is chiefly remembered for the family tree which, engraved upon parchment, held the place of honour above the drawing-room mantelpiece. For when Emily, in whatever way, committed some small offence against her aunt's no doubt severe standard of behaviour, she would be told that her conduct was unworthy of a descendant of the seven kings of France. 'And Emily, with her sweet grey Irish eyes and her curling masses of raven black hair would cry in penitent shame over her unworthiness'. One may smile at the picture typical of the family whose pride is all in the past because the present offers it so little sustenance, but its effect at least was not wholly absurd. 'Those shadowy forms influenced her in childhood, and exercised over her a power that made her shrink from aught that was unworthy, petty or mean. To her the lightest breath of dishonour was to be avoided at any cost of pain, and she wrought into me, her only daughter, that same proud and passionate horror at any taint of shame or merited disgrace. To the world always a brave front was to be kept, and a stainless reputation, for suffering might be borne but dishonour never. A gentlewoman might starve, but she must not run into debt; she might break her heart, but it must be with a smile on her face.'

James Morris was that most attractive and foolish of men, 'a typical Irishman', and he had, 'in a gay youth, with a beautiful wife as light-hearted as himself . . . merrily run through what remained to him in the way of fortune'. His grandchildren knew him as 'a bent old

man, with hair like driven snow, splendidly handsome in his old age, hot-tempered to passion at the lightest provocation, loving and wrathful in quick succession'. The Woods, probably, were the more settled family, but to a young girl, concerned only with appearances and heedless of their implications, the Morrises may well have been the more attractive. They were, it is recorded, clannish; doubtless, isolated in their poverty and by their pride, they made much of one another. Little mention is made of Mrs Morris, but there were three daughters in the house at 8, Albert Square, Clapham Road, where as a girl Annie spent much of her time. Of Aunt Bessie, 'one story of her early life will best tell her character. She was engaged to a young clergyman, and one day when Bessie was at church he preached a sermon taken without acknowledgement from some old divine. The girl's keen sense of honour'—alas for her sense of humour!—'was shocked at the deception, and she broke off her engagement, but remained unmarried for the rest of her life'.* She could not even think of marriage with anyone else! Here was a standard of the highest rectitude, upheld by pride and linked to a strange loyalty. There was, it is said, much bitterness in her life; she lived to serve others, repelling their thanks and their proffered affection, and yet breaking her heart for lack of that love she would permit none to give her. That same loyalty, but finding more positive expression, may be discerned in another of the sisters, Marion Frances Morris (Aunt Minnie), Annie's favourite aunt, a quiet, 'soft, pretty, loving little woman' who was generally called 'Co' because she was 'such a cosy little thing'; though intensely religious, she was, with the exception of Mrs Wood, Annie's only relative who did not desert her through all her changes of belief.

W. B. P. Wood and Emily Morris were married

* *Autobiographical Sketches.*

apparently about the beginning of 1845. They were singularly happy in their married life, wholly devoted to each other. Each in his or her way was instinctively liberal in thought and outlook. 'He was keenly intellectual and splendidly educated; a mathematician and a good classical scholar, thoroughly master of French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese, with a smattering of Hebrew and Gaelic, the treasures of ancient and of modern literature were his daily household delight. . . . Student of philosophy as he was, he was deeply and steadily sceptical; and a very religious relative has told me that he often drove her from the room by his light, playful mockery of the tenets of the Christian faith.' Mrs Wood was a Christian, but unlike many in that severer day she loved her husband 'too much to criticise', and 'was wont to reconcile her own piety and his scepticism by holding that women ought to be religious, while men had a right to read everything and think as they would, provided they were upright and honourable in their lives. But the result of this liberal and unorthodox thought was to insensibly modify and partially rationalise her own beliefs, and she put on one side as errors the doctrines of eternal punishment, the vicarious atonement, the infallibility of the Bible, the equality of the Son with the Father in the Trinity, and other orthodox beliefs, and rejoiced in her later years in the writings of such men as Jowett, Colenso, and Stanley'. Her instinctive romanticism, aided by the rational modes of thought she acquired from her husband, revolted against the bald interpretations of the prevailing Evangelicalism of the time. It was in the 'courtly and reverent' services of Westminster Abbey that she found an expression of religion which 'appeared to her to be intellectually dignified and emotionally satisfactory'. One may hazard that, in fact, the emotional satisfaction was more important than the intellectual, for the latter seems

never to have been effective as a prime motive. It appears fairly evident that from the Woods Mrs Besant derived her intellectual and practical abilities, her adaptability, and her assurance; from the Morrises her emotional qualities, her passionate nature, her deep feeling, sensitiveness, loyalty, pride. The qualities gained from one side came to reinforce those gained from the other. The Woods gave her power to achieve, the Morrises the imaginative will for, and the pride in, achievement. No Wood alone, one feels, could have gone as far as she in imagination; a Morris could have gone as far in imagination only. She was, from the first, though fashioned from not extraordinary materials, peculiarly fitted for a stranger destiny.

2

Few records survive of Annie Wood's earliest years—none, apparently, but those she herself has set down. She was the second of three children, and the only girl. Her brother Harry* was two years her senior; the other, Alf, must have been her junior by twice that. She was born 'within the sound of Bow Bells', at twenty-one minutes to six in the early evening of Friday, October 1st 1847, a year otherwise somewhat uneventful—save that, not inappropriately, it saw the first publication of the Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels. In the pages of her *Autobiography* she gives her horoscope as drawn by a friendly astrologer, but makes no attempt to interpret it. In 1894, however, it was 'delineated' in *The Theosophist* by the famous 'Sepharial', who concluded: 'Annie Besant will live to her sixtieth year, but will not reach her sixtieth birthday, for in March, 1907, the Sun, in the 8th House, meets the square aspect of

* Henry Trueman Wright Wood.

Saturn by direction, and the Moon reaches an equal degree of the sign Virgo, thus forming an evil aspect to both the Sun and Saturn from the 6th House.' Three 'most evil houses' were to affect fatally the lungs and abdominal viscera. 'The voice which has been uplifted in the causes of so many suffering fellow-creatures will not have the power to plead its own, even if it would. The Annie Besant of our sketch will pass away, but the memory of a noble soul will remain in the hearts of the people, and, as we have said, her name will endure'—a prophecy more impressive before the date mentioned than after it.

'Little Pheasantina' was the family nickname bestowed upon her—who gave it little suspecting how far she was to fly. She was a 'delicate and somewhat fractious baby', but even so early characteristically enterprising, for from her cradle she strove to rise in the world . . . too soon, as a scar upon her forehead still testifies. Her earliest recollections are of the house and garden in Grove Road, St John's Wood, where the family were living in 1850 or 1851. 'I can remember my mother hovering round the dinner-table to see that all was bright for the homecoming husband; my brother and I watching "for papa"; the loving welcome, the game of romps that always preceded the dinner of the elder folks. I can remember on the 1st of October, 1851, jumping up in my little cot, and shouting out triumphantly: "Papa! Mamma! I am four years old!" and the grave demand of my brother, conscious of superior age, at dinner-time: "May not Annie have a knife to-day, as she is four years old?"' 1851 was the year of the Great Exhibition, held with great pomp in Hyde Park from May to October. Annie was distressed because she was thought too young to visit it, and her brother scarcely consoled her by bringing home 'one of those folding pictured strips that are sold in the streets,

on which were imaged glories that I longed only the more to see'. (If she had gone it would have been a strange but not impossible coincidence had she encountered there a certain Russian lady whom after thirty-eight years she was to meet, and in whose writings she was to find her final revelation of the truth. For it was in August 1851—it is said—that Madame Blavatsky met one moonlit night beside the Serpentine the spiritual being who revealed to her her ultimate mission—the founding of the Theosophical Society.)

It was, evidently, a happy household, and the more disastrous therefore was the tragedy of the following year—the death of Mr Wood. He still had many medical friends, and was a frequent visitor to the hospitals, assisting sometimes in dissections. During one of these he chanced to cut his finger upon the breast-bone of a person who had died from consumption. He allowed the cut to heal without treatment; then he got wet through and caught a chill. A doctor, after an examination, told his wife calmly: 'You must keep up his spirits. He is in a galloping consumption; you will not have him with you six weeks longer.' Bravely, through the brief illness, she nursed him night and day, until his death upon October 6th 1852. Then, instantly she broke down. That night she locked herself in her room, alone. 'On the following morning her mother, at last persuading her to open the door, started back at the face she saw with the cry: "Good God, Emily, your hair is white!" It was even so; her hair, black, glossy and abundant, which, contrasting with her large grey eyes, had made her face so strangely attractive, had turned grey in that night of agony, and to me, my mother's face is ever framed in exquisite silver bands of hair as white as the driven unsullied snow.' Annie learned this only in after years. Her one vivid memory was of being lifted on to the bed to say good-bye to her

father the day before his death, and being frightened by his changed appearance, his large eyes and strange voice, as he made her promise to be 'a very good girl to darling mamma, as papa was going right away'. Then with her brother Harry she was sent to the Morris home, returning only upon the day of the funeral. She recalls how her mother 'sat with vacant eyes and fixed pallid face following the funeral service, stage after stage, and suddenly, with the words, "It is all over!" fell back fainting.'

There was to be a further sorrow. The youngest child, Alf, fretted for his father, wasting slowly away until at last in the March of 1853 he too died. Just before he was put into the coffin Annie was allowed to see him. She was told to kiss him, and the strange coldness of the corpse startled her as she did so. 'It was,' she says, 'the first time that I had touched Death.'

With the father's death began a new period in the lives of his little family. He was no doubt competent enough at his work, but it seems probable that at heart he despised and disliked it; his real interest in business matters is problematical. His ambition for his son—he urged it even upon his death-bed—was not a commercial but a professional career; a public school, a university, and then the Bar or (Mrs Wood hoped) the Church. Yet though he died believing that he left his wife and children provided for, there was in fact nothing at all but a small sum of ready money.*

But Mrs Wood, who was certainly equally wholehearted in favour of the career, was not to be daunted or put off. Sir William Wood (the future Lord Chancellor) and Western Wood both offered the boy a good

* Some one has suggested that this was due to the dishonesty of a trusted friend, but Mrs Besant hints nothing of this, and the statement arises probably from a confusion with a later incident in the unfortunate widow's life.

city-school education and a start in commercial life with their very considerable influence behind him, but she felt bound by her husband's wishes—not to mention her own inclination—and conceived a plan as bold as it turned out to be practical. She would go to Harrow—where the school fees were comparatively low for pupils from the town—rent a suitable house, and get permission from the head master to take a number of boys as boarders. Thus she would earn a living and provide for her son's education at the same time. The Woods, the female members of the family particularly, did not favour either the plan or its ultimate purpose ; her persistence caused a definite break in her friendly relations with them, though Sir William and Western, despite their disapproval, did much to help her through the first most difficult period.

A move was made without much delay from the house in Bloomfield Road, Maida Hill, where they had been living, to Richmond Terrace, Clapham, not far from the Morrises. There they remained till the late summer or autumn of 1854, when they went to Harrow, there to live for a year in lodgings above a grocer's shop. Here Mrs Wood added a little to her tiny income and partially defrayed the cost of a private tutor by taking care of another boy who was studying for admittance to the school. Meanwhile she interviewed the head master, Dean Vaughan, and gained his support for her scheme ; she found a house and moved into it upon Annie's eighth birthday. It was a charming place—' very old and rambling, rose-covered in front, ivy-covered behind ; it stood on the top of Harrow Hill, between the church and the school'. Its large garden was well stocked with fruit trees and bushes, and at the far end of a rose-bordered terrace a summer-house looked out upon ' one of the fairest views in England. Sheer from your feet downwards went the hill, and then far below stretched

the wooded country till your eye reached the towers of Windsor Castle, far away on the horizon'.

But though Mrs Wood's arrangement with the Harrow authorities lasted for ten years, until after Harry had left the school for Cambridge, and though for eleven years this was the family home, Annie herself spent little time there, save in the holiday months. Harry's education was now settled by bold planning and determined action; Annie's, not by design but by accident, was about to begin. She recalls going one day to a neighbour's house, and there finding 'a stranger sitting in the drawing-room, a lame lady with a strong face, which softened marvellously as she smiled at the child who came dancing in; she called me to her presently, and took me on her lap and talked to me, and on the following day our friend came to see my mother, to ask if she would let me go away and be educated with this lady's niece, coming home for the holidays regularly, but leaving my education in her hands'. Mrs Wood demurred, but she quickly realized that a house full of boys was not the best society for a young girl, that the problem of Annie's education in any case must very soon arise, and that Miss Marryat's offer concealed possibilities far beyond her limited means.

For Miss Marryat was a woman of considerable wealth. She had been the favourite sister of Captain Marryat, the novelist, and had nursed him through his last illness in 1848; then she lived with her mother until she too died; finally, doing her best in her mild Victorian way to justify her existence by making herself useful, she took charge of a niece, Amy Marryat (as a Miss Morris had of little Emily), and proceeded to educate her herself. It was about this time that she met Annie, and fearing lest her niece might be lonely, and thinking that she would rather have two pupils and charges than one, she made this offer to Mrs Wood. Later she added to

her first two : ' she chose " her children "—as she loved to call us—in very definite fashion. Each must be gently born and gently trained, but in such a position that the education freely given should be a relief and aid to a slender parental purse '. She appears to have been of kindly nature, though in some ways stern and determined.

Whereas, however, the methods of Miss Morris looked back to a very distant past, those of Miss Marryat were of the future. She would have no simple learning of a series of facts by heart, but sought to develop the intelligence rather than the mere memory. ' We never used a spelling-book—that torment of the small child—nor an English grammar. But we wrote letters, telling of the things we had seen in our walks, or told again some story we had read ; these childish compositions she would read over with us, correcting all faults of spelling, of grammar, of style, of cadence ; a clumsy sentence would be read aloud, that we might hear how unmusical it sounded, and error in observation or expression pointed out. Then, as the letters recorded what we had seen the day before, the faculty of observation was drawn out and trained. . . . Our French lessons—as the German later—included reading from the very first. On the day on which we began German we began reading Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*, and the verbs given to us to copy out were those that had occurred in the reading. . . . Geography was learned by painting skeleton maps—an exercise much delighted in by small fingers—and by putting together puzzle maps. . . . The only grammar that we ever learned as grammar was the Latin, and that not until composition had made us familiar with the use of the rules therein given. Auntie had a great horror of children learning by rote things they did not understand, and then fancying that they knew them. " What do you mean by that expression, Annie ? " she would ask

me. After feeble attempts to explain, I would answer : " Indeed, Auntie, I know in my own head, but I can't explain." " Then, indeed, Annie, you do not know in your own head, or you could explain, so that I might know in my own head." And so a healthy habit was fostered of clearness of thought and of expression.' Altogether, when one recalls the ineffectual and incompetent methods current in the majority of those schools of the period which would have been open to Mrs Wood's pride and purse, one feels that Annie was in fact very fortunate in her schooling.

Miss Marryat's tutelage lasted just over seven years. For the first five most of the time—always excepting the holiday periods—was spent at Fern Hill, a house near Charmouth village, on the Devon border of Dorset. Annie was thirteen and a half when, in the spring of 1861, she went abroad for the first time with Miss Marryat and two other children, a girl a few months older than herself and a little boy, much younger. They travelled from London to Antwerp, and thence through Aix-la-Chapelle to Bonn. There they spent three months exploring the lovely countryside and rowing on the river, before returning home for the holidays. Two months later, in the autumn, they rejoined Miss Marryat in Paris, to spend there seven happy months. When not engaged in actual lessons they visited art galleries, and famous churches, gardens and monuments. ' The Empire was then in its heyday of glitter, and we much enjoyed seeing the brilliant escort of the Imperial carriage, with plumes and gold and silver dancing in the sunlight, while in the carriage sat the exquisitely lovely empress, with the little boy beside her, touching his cap shyly, but with something of her own grace, in answer to a greeting.'

It is important to observe the practical way in which Miss Marryat taught her charges not only what those

with advantages owe to those without, but also that aid can only be given at the cost of self-sacrifice and effort. No good, she insisted, could come simply by wishing it; it was necessary to take definite action oneself.

Miss Marryat, at home as well as abroad, believed in her children having plenty of fun and exercise; they were taught riding, and went for long walks and pleasant picnics. Annie was always glad to return to Harrow and to her beloved mother, but she was not at all unhappy while away.

In Paris, in the spring of 1862, she was confirmed at the Church of the Rue d'Aguesseau by the Bishop of Ohio, then visiting the city. Mrs Wood came from Harrow to be present at this important ceremony and at the first Easter Communion. They had a holiday fortnight together in Paris.

That summer was spent at Sidmouth, Miss Marryat preparing Annie and another of her pupils for their separation from her. 'More and more we were trained to work alone; our leading-strings were slackened so that we never felt them save when we blundered.' For the winter they went to London, Annie attending French classes. 'When these were over, Auntie told me that she thought all she could usefully do was done, and that it was time that I should try my wings alone.' She had done her work well, Mrs Besant declares; supervision ceased, but not the desire for study. At Harrow once more, she continued to read German with a master, and 'went in' for music with something of the intensive passion which was to mark her pursuits of knowledge through all her later years. 'There was scarcely a sonata of Beethoven's that I did not learn, scarcely a fugue of Bach's that I did not master.'

The next three years, from the summer of 1863 to that of 1866, were probably the happiest of her life. They were spent mostly at Harrow, with frequent visits

to her grandfather's house in Clapham, and in spring and summer to 'my favourite St Leonards—at the far unfashionable end, right away from the gay watering-place folk', where she could ride about the country on her favourite black mare, Gipsy Queen, with Aunt Minnie.

Training apart, Annie Wood was evidently an intelligent child, quick-witted, eager to learn. She cannot, she records, remember being taught to read, or in fact any time when she could not read; already at five years old she found in books her principal source of amusement. 'I had a habit of losing myself so completely in the book that my name might be called in the room where I was, and I never hear it, so that I used to be blamed for wilfully hiding myself when I had simply been away in fairyland or lying trembling beneath some friendly cabbage-leaf as a giant went by.' Her imagination was unusually developed; she had, even then, 'a certain faculty for seeing visions and dreaming dreams', fairies and elves were very real to her, her dolls were neither more nor less than children to her, and the tragedy of Punch and Judy cost her 'many an agony of tears'. These things might seem no more than the experiences of many children, but she declares definitely also that she inherited from her mother a family sensitiveness to purely psychic impressions. 'In our family, as in so many Irish ones, belief in ghosts of all descriptions was general, and my mother has told me of the banshee that she heard wailing when the death-hour of one of the family was near.' Two examples of Mrs Wood's sensitiveness to such impressions are given in her daughter's *Autobiography*. It has been recorded how on the day of her husband's funeral she sat at home with the children, and at last, with the sudden cry that it was all over, fell back fainting. 'She said afterwards that she had followed the hearse, had attended the service, had walked

behind the coffin to the grave.' A few weeks later, visiting Kensal Green Cemetery for the first time, she found her way unaided from the chapel door to the grave, though she had never been told where it was and there was nothing to distinguish it. The second incident, when Mr Wood, some months after his death, is said to have appeared to Mrs Wood and to have foretold the younger boy's death, is certainly more open to rationalist explanations.*

Had Mr Wood lived longer his daughter's story might have been different, but as things were it was inevitable that all these faculties of imagination and fancy should turn to religion for satisfaction. Where else could they turn? Religion was, for better or worse, the only serious interest open to girls at that time and in her position; there she could at least pretend to touch significant realities, and find an object of emotional devotions. Writing in 1893, and looking back over her life, Mrs Besant discerned as its keynote her 'longing for sacrifice to something felt as greater than the self'. She asked no praise or honour for her sacrifices or labours, for this work or that, 'for the efforts to serve have not been painful acts of self-denial, but the yielding to an overmastering desire'. The longing and the desire were both typically religious in character.

During the years of struggle and hardship—greater than Annie was allowed to realise until much later—which followed her husband's death, Mrs Wood must have found much consolation in the 'dignified and artistic' religion which she favoured, and Annie, before she left Harrow for Fern Hill, was already a student of

* It is worth noting that the account of these two incidents appears also in the *Autobiographical Sketches* (1885), published when Mrs Besant was still an Atheist, and four years from *The Secret Doctrine* and Theosophy. There the first is referred to as 'a curious psychological problem which has often puzzled me', while the second is dismissed as 'a most natural dream under the circumstances'.

'children's allegories of a religious kind', and of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Paradise Lost*. These fired her imagination, and thenceforth knights with red-cross shields, dragons invariably defeated, 'a beautiful Divine Prince to smile at you when the battle was over', all mingled in her waking dreams. Soon she was reading tales of the early Christian martyrs: 'I would spend many an hour in day-dreams, in which I stood before Roman judges, before Dominican inquisitors, was flung to lions, tortured on the rack, burned at the stake; one day I saw myself preaching some great new faith to a vast crowd of people, and they listened and were converted, and I became a great religious leader. But always, with a shock, I was brought back to earth, where there were no heroic deeds to do, no lions to face, no judges to defy, but only some dull duty to be performed. And I used to fret that I was born so late, when all the grand things had been done, and when there was no chance of preaching and suffering for a new religion.'

Miss Marryat's religion was of a sterner variety, evangelical, almost Calvinistic. It meant for her children the learning of Epistles and chapters of the Bible by heart, and prayer-meetings at which they in turn, at 'Auntie's' request, 'spoke to the Lord'. But even when Annie longed, as she sometimes did, for her mother's easier faith, she took it all wholly seriously. It was never simply a task to be performed, but the embodiment of a living reality. She took it so seriously that she grew morbidly pious, preferring to suffer for conscience' sake rather than to taste the unsanctioned joys of theatre or of ball. Her confirmation in Paris in 1862 came as an event of the utmost significance. 'The careful preparation, the prolonged prayers, the wondering awe as to the "seven-fold gifts of the Spirit", which were to be given by "the laying on of hands", all tended to excitement. I could scarcely control myself as I knelt at the altar

rails, and felt as though the gentle touch of the aged bishop, which fluttered for an instant on my bowed head, was the very touch of the wing of that " Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove ", whose presence had been so earnestly invoked.' She felt that she was taking upon herself the burden of her salvation, a very serious matter. In Paris too she discovered the intimate and overwhelming appeal which religion, under some circumstances, can make to the emotions. There for the first time she realized ' the sensuous enjoyment that lay in introducing colour and fragrance and pomp into religious services, so that the gratification of the aesthetic emotions became dignified with the garb of piety. . . . Insensibly the colder, cruder Evangelicalism that I had never thoroughly assimilated, grew warmer and more brilliant, and the ideal Divine Prince of my childhood took on the more pathetic lineaments of the Man of Sorrows, the deeper attractiveness of the suffering Saviour of Men. Keble's *Christian Year* took the place of *Paradise Lost*, and as my girlhood began to bud towards womanhood, all its deeper currents set in the direction of religious devotion '. She was not allowed to read love-stories, and her thoughts of the future ' were scarcely touched by any of the ordinary hopes and fears of a girl lifting her eyes towards the world she is shortly to enter. They were filled with broodings over the days when girl-martyrs were blessed with visions of the King of Martyrs, when sweet St Agnes saw her celestial Bridegroom, and angels stooped to whisper melodies in St Cecilia's raptured ear. " Why then and not now ? " my heart would question, and I would lose myself in these fancies, never happier than when alone '.

Some extensive quotation seems necessary in dealing with these influences, lest a mere summary might appear to exaggerate. Here was, in its intensity at any rate, no normal feeling, and cut off from all contact with the world, with no ballast of experience, it was able to assume

exotic proportions and shapes. Miss Marryat was 'a maiden lady, looking on all young men as wolves to be kept far from her growing lambs', and even when Annie rejoined her mother at Harrow in 1863—a girl of sixteen—her relations with others, and most of all with young men, were of the most superficial and purely social character. She met them at garden-parties, she played croquet with them and practised archery, she danced with them at balls (to this extent her earlier severity was relaxed), but she preferred conversation to flirting, and formed—as far as her own confessions tell us—not even the beginnings of any romantic attachment. Men fell in love with her, even to the extent of suggesting marriage to her mother, but she scarcely perceived it; they had no part in her deeper thoughts and feelings. She had 'the germ of passion' in her, but she was averse from such things, and found her only emotional outlets in her devotion to her mother and her religion. (It is a strange fact, the more noteworthy in comparison with her deep and enduring love for her mother, that her brother apparently played little part in her life, and occupied her thoughts scarcely at all.) In her girlhood she had but two ideals—her mother and the Christ. From the one she could not bear to be parted, giving her 'passionate love'; to the other she prayed:

'Blessed art Thou, O most merciful God, Who didst vouchsafe to espouse me to the heavenly Bridegroom in the waters of baptism, and hast imparted Thy body and blood as a new gift of espousal and the meet consummation of Thy Love. . . . Oh, that I could embrace Thee with that most burning love of angels.

'Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth; for Thy love is better than wine. Draw me, we will run after Thee. The king hath brought me into his chambers. . . . Let my soul, O Lord, feel the sweetness of Thy presence. May it taste how sweet Thou art. . . .

May the sweet and burning power of Thy love, I beseech Thee, absorb my soul.'

She desired, secretly, to become a Sister of Mercy, secluded from the world, devoted to God.

Thus, with fasting ' according to the ordinances of the Church ', and flagellation to see whether she could bear physical pain, she found emotional satisfaction. But her intellect was not less active, and in her studies may be seen precisely the same distorted application of immense energy. There was upon the Harrow bookshelves a Library of the Fathers of the Early Christian Church, and to this she devoted herself, fascinated by ' the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistles of Polycarp, Barnabas, Ignatius, and Clement, the commentaries of Chrysostom, the confessions of Augustine '. She threw herself ardently into a study of the question : ' Where is now the Catholic Church ? ', read the works of many of the seventeenth century divines, and those of Pusey, Liddon, and Keble, ' joying in the great conception of a Catholic Church, lasting through the centuries, built on the foundations of apostles and martyrs, stretching from the days of Christ Himself down to our own '. The contrast between the early Evangelical training and the doctrines of the Primitive Catholic Church would, she says, probably have driven her then and there to Roman Catholicism, had she not found proof in Pusey and others that the English Church might be Catholic even though non-Roman. She adopted practices—the sign of the cross, weekly communion, a more rigorous fasting—which would certainly have shocked Miss Marryat and in fact seriously alarmed her mother.

Recalling this period from the distance of 1885, she adds : ' I never dreamed of forgeries, of pious frauds, of writings falsely ascribed to venerated names.' She had then no suspicion ; it had not even occurred to her to doubt—her faith paid the tribute of absolute belief to

every Christian authority. She continues: 'Nor do I now regret that it was so; for without belief, the study of the early Fathers would be an intolerable weariness; and that old reading of mine has served me well in many of my later controversies with Christians who knew the literature of their Church less well than I.'*

These matters occupied much of her time, but they were not her only interest. She read a few stray scientific works, was delighted by a translation of Plato (though the 'insatiable questioning of Socrates' annoyed her), and of Dante and of the *Iliad*. Wordsworth and Cowper, and with them 'all the seventeenth and eighteenth century "poets"' she did not like at all, but she read them conscientiously through. Southey, Spenser, and Milton, on the other hand, were favourites. She was allowed but few novels, and those chiefly by Scott and Kingsley, not Miss Braddon or Mrs Henry Wood. She never attended the theatre, but sometimes went to good classical concerts. Mrs Wood 'had a horror of sentimentality in girls, and loved to see them bright and gay, and above all things absolutely ignorant of all evil things and of premature love-dreams.'†

Already, so early, there may be noted in Annie Wood the characteristics which were to shape her life—a fundamental emotionalism appearing in her devotion to her mother and her God; the longing to make of herself a sacrifice, a personal and dramatic sacrifice, by martyrdom. Her religion thus far was no salvation from the sorrows and terrors of life—of which she knew nothing; what she sought in sacrifice was simply the emotional pleasure of giving. The emotional was at that time certainly the predominant impulse, but there must be noted too in her the intellectual curiosity, the conscientious way in which she followed her studies, and her capacity for sheer assimilation and retention. Lacking

* *Autobiographical Sketches.* † *Ibid.*

any of these qualities—which were to be developed, but never essentially added to—Annie Wood could never have become the Annie Besant the world knows to-day.

As things were, they thrust her directly forward to her fate. She knew nothing of life. 'Never dreaming that life might be a heavy burden, save as I saw it in the poor I was sent to help,' she waited upon the threshold, not allowed even to peer out upon its realities. When at last she did emerge the transition seemed, therefore, the more terrible; passing with her marriage out of her mother's care, it was as though she passed, suddenly, from a dream into a nightmare.

3

It was, then, ironically enough, her excess of piety combined with her utter ignorance of life which brought upon her the two main tragedies of her early life—her first doubts (which finally were to lead to her rejection of Christianity) and her marriage. The former was in essence a tragedy of too much believing—she had accepted everything so completely at its face value that when she discovered even one falsity her whole edifice of faith collapsed; the latter was rather a tragedy of diffidence—she had never needed to depend upon herself, and now when necessity came, when all her being warned her against a course which was being forced on her, she could do nothing. Her education and upbringing, admirable as they were from some points of view, failed in that they made no contact with life at any essential point; failed, too, in that they set so completely apart emotional and intellectual knowledge. It is noteworthy that in all her earliest dilemmas her emotional acquiescence was able to overcome her intellectual resistance. For she was primarily an emotional being. Thus, as will be seen, she

overcame her first religious doubts; thus she allowed herself to be forced into her marriage.

The Christmas of 1865 was spent with the Morrises at Albert Square. A small mission church had just been opened in a very poor district near at hand, and Aunt Minnie, who no doubt—like Annie herself at this period—regarded the poor as sent into the world to serve as objects of charity, was much interested in its work. Annie needed no encouragement. 'My High Church enthusiasm was in full bloom, and the services in this little Mission Church were "high", whereas those in all the neighbouring churches were "low". . . . We decorated the church, worked ornaments for it, and thought we were serving God when we were really amusing ourselves in a small place where our help was overestimated, and where the clergy, very likely unconsciously, flattered us for our devotion.' * The following Easter she visited it again, but this time, one may imagine, with little spirit for amusement or flattery; her heart was heavy with a consciousness of sin, despite her wholly excellent intentions. For it had been with the perfectly laudable desire of realizing more clearly the facts of 'those last sacred days of God incarnate on earth, working out man's salvation', that just before Easter she started to compile from the Four Gospels the story of Holy Week. She soon discovered difficulties. Matthew, Mark and Luke did not wholly correspond, and John would not fit in at all! 'I became uneasy as I proceeded with my task, for discrepancies leaped at me from my four columns; the uneasiness grew as the contradictions increased, until I saw with a shock of horror that my "harmony" was a discord, and a doubt of the veracity of the story sprang up like a serpent hissing in my face.' She was horrified, though more at the fact of her doubt than the doubt itself, for all her religious

* *Autobiographical Sketches.*

training had led her to see doubt as something to be not examined but repented of. Apparent contradictions were tests of faith—or temptations of the devil! She knew that there were persons—even men high in the Church itself, as Colenso, Bishop of Natal—who cast doubts upon the Bible's historical accuracy, but she regarded such heretics with horror. (She was at this time as intolerant as anyone; the stuff of martyrs is necessarily the stuff of which inquisitors are made.) One of her favourite passages was Pusey's preface to *Daniel the Prophet*, a refutation of heresy and a damnation of heretics, and she 'shudderingly recognized that I must be very unlearned and unstable to find discord among the Holy Evangelists'. Instead of thinking she fasted; she shrank back from all inquiry and managed—for the time being—to believe triumphantly. It is the part of the emotions to accept, of the intellect to reject—and the emotions, united in belief, triumphed easily against all reason.

Thus it was with an added devotion that she decorated the little church with the fresh spring flowers, daffodils, primroses, violets; thus it was with an unusual piety that she met and conversed with the attendant clergy, among whom was a new figure, a young Cambridge man, who had passed as twenty-eighth wrangler and just taken orders. He was an under master in the Grammar School in the neighbouring district of Stockwell, and was acting temporarily as deacon at the church. Little, apparently, passed between them, and the matter might have closed, as completely as that of her first doubts seemed likely to, had not misfortune brought them together that summer, probably at St Leonards, where Mrs Wood, Aunt Minnie, and Annie went for their usual holiday visit. For a week they were 'the only two young ones in a small party of holiday-makers, and in our walks, rides, and drives we were naturally companions'.

That he should be attracted by the handsome, intelligent, lively girl was not surprising, nor perhaps that he should misinterpret the admiration she gave to his office rather than to his person. An hour before his departure he proposed to her—and took her consent for granted. Her companionship with him had been frank and full, and his was, she has said, ' a perfectly fair assumption with girls accustomed to look on all men as possible husbands, but wholly mistaken as regarded myself, whose thoughts were quite in other directions '. She was horrified, her pride hurt by the implied accusation of flirting, and while she hesitated in her first impulse of refusal, he bound her to silence until he himself could speak to her mother, and hurried away to catch his train. There followed a fortnight of misery ; this was her first secret from her mother, yet even at so important a time her fear of anything approaching a dishonourable action kept her to her promise. When at last, on her return to London, she met Frank Besant again and refused to be silent, it was too late. ' Out of sheer weakness and fear of inflicting pain I drifted into an engagement with a man I did not pretend to love.'

Her mother at first declared her too young to be engaged, and she went in the autumn to Switzerland with some Manchester friends—' Lawyer ' Roberts and his wife and two daughters. It was Annie's first visit, and she saw all the usual sights. They went to Chamounix, ' worshipped Mont Blanc ', crossed the Mer de Glace and the Mauvais Pas, visited the Monastery of St Bernard (' I lost my heart to the beautiful dogs '), travelled by steamer down the lake of Thun, saw the Jungfrau and ' the exquisite Staubbach ', visited Lausanne, Berne, and Geneva, and shuddered with awe and wonder and delight in the dungeon of Chillon. During this holiday she became reconciled to the engagement ; her best impulses were precisely those which were driving her on to

their future confusion. Frank Besant was a clergyman, the consecrated servant and messenger of Christ, and seeing him as such her 'dislike of the thought of marriage faded before the idea of becoming the wife of a priest, working ever in the Church and among the poor. I had no outlet for my growing desire for usefulness in my happy and peaceful home-life, where all religious enthusiasm was regarded as unbalanced and unbecoming; all that was deepest and truest in my nature chafed against my easy, useless days, longed for work, yearned to devote itself, as I had read women saints had done, to the service of the Church and of the poor, to the battling against sin and misery—what empty names sin and misery then were to me! "You will have more opportunities for doing good as a clergyman's wife than as anything else", was one of the pleas urged on my reluctance.' At an earlier date she had turned to religion as the one serious interest open to her; she became now a clergyman's wife simply for lack of any more promising profession. It seemed the only escape from her easy but purposeless existence. From the impossible ideal of being a Sister of Mercy she turned not altogether sorrowfully to this new career. In October 1866 they were formally betrothed. One later attempt she did make to break free, realizing how impossible the position was, but this time her mother's pride, blinding her to all possible consequences, would not allow Annie to 'dishonour' herself by breaking her word. Mrs Wood was stern, and Annie yielded.

The period thenceforward to the marriage passed quietly. In the spring of 1867 Mrs Wood left Harrow —Harry was now at Cambridge—to live at St Leonards. That autumn she and Annie went to stay at the Roberts's home at Pendleton, near Manchester, and one incident during their visit must be noted, though details are not necessary. Five Fenians were accused of shooting a

AT EIGHTEEN

policeman. Mr Roberts, a Radical, well known in Manchester for his readiness to fight a poor man's battle without thought of payment, defended them. He was, Annie says, her first tutor in Radicalism, and she was an apt pupil. Up to this time she 'had taken no interest in politics, but had unconsciously reflected more or less the decorous Whiggism which had always surrounded me. I regarded "the poor" as folk to be educated, looked after, charitably dealt with, and always treated with the most perfect courtesy, the courtesy being due from me, as a lady, to all equally, whether they were rich or poor. But to Mr Roberts "the poor" were the working-bees, the wealth-producers, with a right to self-rule not to looking-after, with a right to justice not to charity, and he preached his doctrines to me in season and out of season'—in particular as she drove him in the mornings to his Manchester office. Once more, in a quite different way, she was fortunate in finding a tutor ahead of his day.

The particulars of the case do not matter. The issue was one rather of race-hatred and revenge than of any desire for justice; the judge was notorious for his harshness and prejudice, the prisoners were brought into court in chains, and there was no doubt as to the verdict before the trial began; the five were sentenced to death, though two were afterwards reprieved. The significance of the trial to Annie Wood was that she saw it all as it were from within—she drove through the angry, surging crowds, was present in court during the trial, saw the black cap put ready for use before the verdict had been given, and the sorrow of a girl engaged to one of the five Irishmen. What was largely a political issue was revealed to her as essentially a human one; the appeal to her emotions received an immediate response, and she was never throughout her career to lose her sense of the human significance of politics.

But she had little time, just then, to think of politics. In *The Times* for December 28th 1867 appeared an announcement :

> On the 21st inst, at the Church of St Mary Magdalene, St Leonards, by the Rev E. Digby Smith, M.A., assisted by the Rev W. Hulme, M.A., the Rev Frank Besant, M.A., of Cheltenham College, son of William Besant, Esq, of Southsea, to Annie, only daughter of the late William Burton Persse Wood, Esq., of St John's Wood. No cards.

Annie was married, she has recorded, with ' no more idea of the marriage relation than if I had been four years old instead of twenty '. It was an ignorance typical of her state of mind, her whole existence, at this time. One must accept it as a fact that she really did know nothing whatever of sexual matters ; astonishing though it may seem—yet it is consistent with her character—she had neither sexual curiosities nor desires ; she had not thought of the matter just as she had not thought of falling in love with the young men at Harrow. It is evident from the paragraph she devotes to it in her *Autobiography* that her discovery of the reality was to her indeed a ' rude awakening ', a ' terrible shock ' to her modesty and pride. The difference of opinions, the lack of sympathy or of unanimity upon any single point, which runs throughout the record of her relations with her husband, must have been strengthened by this fundamental discord. It caused an immediate breach which, never being bridged, inevitably widened.

There survives, for posterity's interest, a photograph of Annie Wood taken at Hastings in 1867, a few months before her marriage. She is with her mother. The latter is seated, upon a chair all but hidden by the wide, voluminous dress of decorous black ; she wears a lace cap and but few, and jet, ornaments. Annie's dress is less sombre, though scarcely less cumbersome. She kneels at her mother's side, their arms linked, their hands clasped lovingly, almost as though in farewell. She is

undeniably handsome ; one cannot but note her clear-cut, intelligent features, her fine profile—too fine, one feels, for the apparent destiny as a country clergyman's wife which closes rather than opens before her. Here, surely, is a girl meant for something better than the trivialities of parish gossip.

If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.

FRANCIS BACON

II

THE DISCOVERY OF REALITY

I

IT IS the biographer's business to be fair to all his characters, but it is difficult to be fair to the Rev Frank Besant. Admittedly we know little about him. The only member of the family who has attained any degree of fame was his elder brother, Sir Walter Besant ; their father was an unimportant Portsmouth merchant, and few domestic details have been chronicled. One can only say that he was probably at least five years older than his wife, and equally probably not much more. Mrs Besant has never been informative ; in 1891 she replied to the questionings of W. T. Stead that there should be a ' statute of limitations for such things ', and that the facts of their life together really did not matter. Stead agreed with her : ' It is not necessary to say much about the Rev Frank Besant. He had a trying part to fill, and it may perhaps be permissible to say that he was hardly equal to the task. He was a clergyman, conventional, and conservative.' The fault, he implied, was partly at least Mrs Besant's : ' She could not be the Bride of Heaven, and therefore became the bride of Mr Frank Besant. He was hardly an adequate substitute.' *

Certainly it would be difficult to conceive the qualities necessary in a man who would prove adequate to Mrs Besant—to all that she was to become—but, on the other hand, one can imagine few making a worse job of it than he did. They were in many respects an ill-matched pair, as she acknowledges, he ' with very high ideas of a husband's authority and a wife's submission,

* *Review of Reviews*, October 1891.

holding strongly to the "master-in-my-own-house theory", thinking much of the details of home arrangements, precise, methodical, easily angered and with difficulty appeased', she 'accustomed to freedom, indifferent to home details, impulsive, very hot-tempered, and proud as Lucifer'. Even physically it is not a pleasant impression one gathers of him—good-looking perhaps in a somewhat ascetic way, but sparely-built, sandy-haired, and imperative in manner, quick-tempered, irritable, apt to stand upon his dignity, and intensely jealous of all he regarded as his own property.

More than temperament, however, was against them; their outlooks were wholly incompatible. It has been said of Lady Anne Clifford that she was not born to be a wife and mother, but rather a great-grandmother and a widow; and of Mrs Besant, too, it is true that *she* was not born to be a wife and mother—which was all that Frank Besant would ever have dreamed of asking. If in her, as some say, the spirit of Giordano Bruno was reincarnated, then surely it was that of John Knox—the John Knox of *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*—that lived in him: 'Hereof it is plain, that frome all woman, be she maried or unmaried, is all authority taken to execute any office, that apperteineth to man. Yea plain it is that all woman is commanded, to serve, to be in humilitie and subjection. . . . It is not permitted to women to speake, but to be in silence, as the law saith. What saith the lawe? Unto thy husband, shall thy conversion be, and he shall bear dominion over thee.' Mr Besant would have read that passage with appreciation, as would many Englishmen in 1867; in that respect at least England was still in the Dark Ages.

There was discord from the beginning, no doubt partly consequent upon the sexual ignorance and discovery already referred to, and the honeymoon trip to

Paris and Southsea was probably not a happy one. Mrs Besant describes herself as scared and outraged at heart from the very first, and apparently her husband soon recovered from any indulgent tenderness. An impatient harshness took its place, and there were quarrels and repeated storms of tears. More sympathetic treatment, she suggests, 'might gradually have turned me into a fair imitation of the proper conventional article'; but it is doubtful. Some one has said that no woman cannot be either kissed or kicked into submission, and that Frank Besant tried the wrong way. But Mrs Besant was not born to submit, while to him a satisfactory wife was necessarily a submissive one. Thus far her education and upbringing had been very much that of any exceptionally sheltered girl in almost any modern century —now she was emerging into the world, facing for the first time the responsibilities and facts of life, previously so carefully kept from her. It would seem that her husband did not scruple at times, in his anger, to use physical violence, for her doctor in 1878 gave evidence in court of cruelty 'which—had the deed of separation not been held as a condonation—would have secured me a divorce *a mensa et thoro*'.

Their circumstances were not propitious. He had, as the announcement of the marriage showed, left Stockwell Grammar School for Cheltenham, and thither at the end of the Christmas holidays they went to live in lodgings. They were not well off, and Annie knew little of household management and expenditure. She was eager to learn, but she had little patience for the minor domesticities, and she cared nothing for the social gossip of her neighbours, which mainly concerned servants and babies, and touched not at all upon her favourite topics of theology, politics, and science. She kept to herself, did her housework as expeditiously as possible, and continued to devote herself to reading.

Secretly she fretted for her mother. 'The easy-going, sunshiny, enthusiastic girl changed—and changed pretty rapidly—into a grave, proud, reticent woman, burying deep in her heart all her hopes, her fears, and her disillusions.'

Some outlet she had to find, and in the early spring of 1868 she began to write. Her first choice of subjects showed clearly where her interests lay. She did not, like most young authors, begin tentatively; she had ceased to be tentative—if she ever was. Her marriage, perhaps, for all its failure, had nevertheless roused her emotionally, brought her to realization of a need for action. Before she had been content to absorb; now she must produce. She did so abundantly. In the brief interval of a few months—for some time before the birth on January 16th 1869 of her first child, Arthur Digby Besant, she was too ill to write—she completed an ambitious work, *The Lives of the Black Letter Saints*, a number of not very substantial short stories, and a novel which was rejected by *The Family Herald* as too political, though the editor thought well enough of it to add that another, if of purely domestic interest, would probably be accepted. The politics were, doubtless, not of a kind to commend themselves to his readers—or, incidentally, to the Rev Frank, though one may suppose that he looked with a more tolerant eye upon the Black Letter Saints and upon a theological pamphlet which dealt with 'the duty of fasting incumbent on all faithful Christians, and was very patristic in its tone'.* The novel and the religious works must naturally have seemed the more important to their author, but it was the short stories which were accepted—and paid for—by *The Family Herald*. 'It was the first money I had ever earned, and the pride of earning was added to the pride

* I cannot trace this pamphlet; whether it was ever actually published is not clear. The *Lives* was apparently never printed.

of authorship. In my childish delight and practical religion, I went down on my knees and thanked God for sending it to me, and I saw myself earning heaps of golden guineas, and becoming quite a support of the household. Besides, it was " my very own ", I thought, and a delightful sense of independence came over me.' Alas, it was not long before she learned that in fact ' all a married women earned by law belonged to her owner, and that she could have nothing that belonged to her of right '.

2

So indeed it was. Women in the upper and middle classes occupied at this time a peculiar and unfortunate position. The industrial revolution had made unnecessary many of the traditional household employments such as spinning and bread-making, and while the poorer women went into the factories the wealthier took more and more to utterly useless drawing-room accomplishments. The average middle-class woman of the forties, fifties, and sixties was in no way educated to be her husband's intellectual equal ; it was inconceivable then that she should be his equal in any other field than the purely domestic one, and her natural inferiority was simply taken for granted. It was accepted as one of Nature's laws. An unmarried woman controlled her property and her body—and her child—precisely as did a man. Upon marriage she ceased to possess property ; her earned or inherited wealth became automatically her husband's. Her signature was invalid without his, and thus she had no independent power of making a will, entering into a contract, or bringing an action. By marrying, as Mrs Besant said, a woman lost her legal existence. Sir George Jessel declared in the House of Commons in 1869 : ' The existing law is a relic of

slavery ; the laws of slavery, whether Roman or English —for we once had slaves and slave laws in England—gave to the master of a slave the important rights of flogging and imprisoning him. A slave could not possess property of his own and could not make contracts except for his master's benefit, and the master alone could sue for an injury to the slave ; while the only liability of the master was that he must not let his slave starve. This is exactly the position of the wife under the English law.' A wife having no money of her own could rarely take action against her husband for divorce or separation, while he could always use what had been her money to act against her. Control of the children was absolutely his. The laws, moreover, were upheld by public opinion. Said one popular authoress, Mrs William Ellis, in the forties : ' It is the privilege of a married woman to be able to show, by the most delicate attentions, how much she feels her husband's superiority to herself, not by mere personal services . . . but by a respectful deference to his opinion, a willingly imposed silence when he speaks.'

In the absence of anything better to do, the Victorian woman was recommended to preoccupy herself with religion. As another woman writer explained : ' She needs solace and occupation, and religion affords her both. . . . It is the domesticating tendency of religion that especially prepossesses men in its favour, and makes them, even if indifferent to it themselves, desire it, at least, in their nearest female relations.' But, again, even here, they were permitted no practical outlet, and the result was little more than a morbid torturing of conscience. As time went on women's characters necessarily seemed under these circumstances to deteriorate, and, to descend to smaller things, the fashions of the period, with their huge skirts and tight lacing, were unhealthy and restricting.

It is noteworthy that the few women who during these years had some work of their own had as a rule little sympathy with the complaints of those less fortunate. Queen Victoria, for example, 'could not bear women mixing in politics', though she herself never held notably aloof. She loved her work and found it 'delightful', yet she wrote: 'The Queen is most anxious to enlist everyone who can speak or write to join in checking this mad wicked folly of "Woman's Rights", with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety. . . . It is a subject which makes the Queen so furious that she cannot contain herself.' * Possibly Mrs Besant shared something of this detachment, save in so far as her own freedom was restricted; at any rate, though naturally she supported it, she never gave herself wholeheartedly to the cause of women's rights. Religious freedom was her first concern, and by the time she had learnt the real extent of her sex's servitude she was embarked upon altogether wider issues. But where she had suffered she could be pungent enough. Married women, she remarked, were classed with minors and lunatics in their incapacity to manage property, but whereas minors came of age and lunatics often recovered, 'married women remain incapable during the whole of their married life'. The wife had none of the traditional rights of the Englishman, neither 'enjoyment of life, limbs, body, health, reputation', personal liberty, nor property. Her soul was about all she could call her own—and even that was claimed by the Church.

* These facts and quotations have, by permission, been taken largely from Lady Stephen's admirable biography, *Emily Davies and Girton College* (Constable, 1927), in the first chapter of which the whole subject is examined and set forth with a wealth of detail I could not attempt to emulate here.

3

To Mrs Besant, motherhood also brought suffering; she was ill both before and after her son's birth, and her daughter, Mabel Emily, was born prematurely on August 28th 1870 as the result of a shock; her recovery to health was slow and, apparently, not too complete. These troubles, together with the care the children demanded, closed temporarily her literary career, and at the same time relieved the necessity she felt for such expression. Here at last was some one to take her mother's place, upon whom she could pour out her pent-up passionate devotion.

But she was far from happy about her mother. For years a trusted lawyer had been pocketing money paid to him by Mrs Wood, who suddenly found to her dismay that she was deeply in debt. About the time of Mabel's birth she had to sell her home and go to live with her son, who by Lord Hatherley's influence had become under-secretary to the Society of Arts, and was working too for the Patent Office. Despite her sacrifices for him, she worried over her dependence, and would sit all day without a fire, or go out at meal-times, simply to save him a few pence. Mrs Besant knew this. She had, too, been visiting the poor who inevitably existed behind the pleasant leisurely façade of spas, parks, elegant hotels, and boarding-houses presented by Cheltenham to its health-seeking visitors, and she was realizing that for all her distress there were very many much worse off.

A crisis was rapidly approaching. She was depressed, nervous, unhappy; her depth of melancholy is only too clearly apparent in a photograph taken in Cheltenham at this time. She must have felt that life—God—had thrust her into a trap from which there was no escape.

Before her marriage she had always the future to look to, to anticipate in dreams ; now awakening had come, and it was evident that there was no future save such as she herself might fashion. Life was neither gracious nor good !

It needed, however, the sight of another's pain, suffered under her eyes and by one she loved passionately, to bring her to the point of conscious rebellion. In the spring of 1871 her children caught whooping-cough, and Mabel, delicate and only seven months old, all but died. Bronchitis set in, and then congestion of the lungs. For weeks, day and night, the child suffered agonies which only chloroform could relieve, and for weeks, day and night, her mother, watching over her alone, prayed that she might die rather than be tortured so, and revolted against a God who could permit such agony to a 'helpless, sinless babe'. The moment that Mabel was out of danger her mother collapsed, and for a week lay in her bed exhausted and scarcely conscious.

When at last she rose it was to begin a new life—one might almost say to begin life, for scepticism is more than the beginning of faith ; it is, too, the beginning of thought. No man can know God until he has denied him ; no man thinks—that is, exists—consciously and independently until he has rejected and doubted. Up to this point her development and her experience had been divorced ; henceforward the gap was bridged—belief and action were, more and more, to run together. She began, at last, to live by her beliefs.

As with Bradlaugh, it was her very faith which forced scepticism upon her. This time her revolt was no intellectual one, but a strong, emotional reaction following many months of terrible suffering. 'To me Christ was no abstract idea, but a living reality, and all my heart rose up against this Person in whom I believed, and whose individual finger I saw in my baby's agony,

my own misery, the breaking of my mother's proud heart under a load of debt, and all the bitter suffering of the poor.' As yet she did not reject; she only rebelled. It was a terrible, a vital struggle which went on all that summer, upon one occasion driving her—after a fierce quarrel with her husband—almost to suicide. The uncorked chloroform bottle was in her hand when, she says, she seemed to hear the spoken words: 'O coward, coward, who used to dream of martyrdom, and cannot bear a few short years of pain!' She flung the bottle away, and fell fainting to the floor.

Her husband gave her neither assistance nor sympathy. One imagines him going about in a perpetual state of tight-lipped exasperation. He had no doubts, and saw no reason for hers. Why *should* she concern herself with such matters? Were they not *his* business? Let her see to the housekeeping and the children! The Rev Frank Besant, it is impossible not to feel, was quite prepared to do all the thinking permitted in his household.

Her only friend was a Cheltenham clergyman, who urged her, among other advice, 'to know Christ and judge religions by Him; don't judge Him by religions'. It was good advice, but perfectly useless; the Christianity which faced and surrounded her in her daily life was not that of Christ but of the Church, and it was with that she had to deal. This time emotional doubt had preceded intellectual, but the trial of the Rev Charles Voysey for heresy, reported in the papers, brought back to mind her unfortunate exercise in devotion of Easter, 1866. The acquiescence of the heart then had prevailed against the evidence of the reason; now that both head and heart were in revolt, the old arguments were doubly impotent. She began the composition of an essay calling into question the absolute verbal inspiration of the Bible.

This new line of investigation was interrupted by illness. The doctor who had laboured to save her child's life now laboured for hers. An intelligent man, he realized his patient's nature and needs, that her mind must have occupation; he brought her books on anatomy and science, and found what time he could to discuss their subjects with her. For the time he diverted her thoughts, but she recovered only to resume the conflict, and more systematically now. The first purely emotional anguish had vanished, and though the basis of her revolt remained emotional—' the uprising of an outraged conscience '—rather than intellectual, still her approach to the problems which baffled her was wholly rational. She resolved to examine carefully and thoroughly the dogmas of the Church ' one by one, so that I should never again say " I believe " where I had not proved, and that, however diminished my area of belief, what was left of it might at least be firm under my feet '. She was faced by four principal problems—first, the eternity of punishment after death; second, ' the meaning of " goodness " and " love ", as applied to a God who had made this world, with all its sin and misery '; third, the Atonement, and the justice of a God who would accept vicarious suffering and righteousness; and last, what had already preoccupied her, ' the meaning of " inspiration " as applied to the Bible, and the reconciliation of the perfections of the author with the blunders and immoralities of the work '.

Here was a very natural and orderly approach. Such vital questions as the deity of Christ, the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul she came to only later. This surely is evidence of the fundamental nature, the integrity, of her revolt. She conceived for herself, with no glimmer of suggestion from without, her first doubts of the Bible and of Christianity. Thus far

the sole controversies with which she was familiar, or took any interest in, had been those dividing the various Christian sects, and only from such orthodox works as Pusey's *Daniel* and Liddon's *Bampton Lectures*, together with the most occasional and reserved newspaper comment, had she gathered hints of deeper disbeliefs and profounder heresies. Her approach to scepticism was as ingenuous as it was genuine ; it was no less genuine than, and indeed analogous to, that of any Renaissance sceptic renouncing the authority of the Catholic Church.

4

There came just at this time—the autumn of 1871—the respite of a complete change of home and locality. She had previously written to Lord Hatherley asking whether her husband could not obtain a Crown living. One in Northumberland, near Alnwick Castle, was offered, then another in the village of Sibsey, in Lincolnshire, which carried with it a vicarage house and an income of £410 a year. Frank Besant accepted the latter. 'The village was scattered over a considerable amount of ground, but the work was not heavy. The church was one of the fine edifices for which the fen country is so famous, and the vicarage was a comfortable house, with large and very beautiful gardens and paddock, and with outlying fields.' * No wonder that he clung securely to such a living, remaining there until his death in 1917 ! But his wife was little happier than in the more social atmosphere of the Garden Town of Cheltenham. 'The people were farmers and labourers, with a sprinkling of shopkeepers ; the only "society" was that of the neighbouring clergy, Tory and prim to an appalling extent.' † As vicar's wife now, she took up

* *Autobiographical Sketches.* † *Ibid.*

parish work with her usual industry. Instantly she was brought into contact with the conditions under which the agricultural labourer then existed, and the seeds of sympathy for the oppressed, implanted by Mr Roberts of Manchester, at last began to bear fruit. She saw how intolerable was the labourer's lot, and how the farmers combined to prevent any improvement. The Agricultural Labourers' Union had just penetrated to that part of the country, and employers were resolute in refusing work to any Union man. 'The farmers hated the Union because its success meant higher wages for the men, and it never struck them that they might well pay less rent to the absent landlord and higher wage to the men who tilled their fields. They had only civil words for the burden that crushed them, hard words for the mowers of their harvests and the builders-up of their ricks; they made common cause with their enemies instead of with their friends, and instead of leaguing themselves together with the labourers as forming together the true agricultural interest, they leagued themselves with the landlords against the labourers, and so made ruinous fratricidal strife instead of easy victory over the common foe.' That was true of conditions sixty years ago; it is, unfortunately, scarcely less true to-day. But if Mrs Besant gave expression to such views—as she probably did—then her husband must have wondered whether he did not prefer even her theological questionings.

These had not ceased; rather, she was giving more time to them, and was reading at once heretical, Broad Church, and orthodox works by Robertson, Stopford Brooke, Stanley, Greg, Matthew Arnold, Liddon, Mansel, Pusey, Francis Newman (Cardinal Newman's sceptical younger brother), and others, and at the same time investigating the tenets of such creeds as Mahommedanism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. 'Month by

month I grew more sceptical as to the possibility of finding certainty in religion.'

So far she had been wholly alone in her doubts ; she knew from her reading that others shared them, but that was all. Relief was at hand. Again illness intervened —the fierce strain of mental struggle upon the physical frame is made clear by these recurrent illnesses—and following a severe attack of congestion of the lungs and a slow recovery, she visited her mother in London in the early autumn of 1872. One Sunday morning she went to St George's Hall, where Voysey himself was preaching. Here, she found, were people who had rejected the dogmas which seemed to her so revolting and so puzzling, and yet had drawn nearer to the true spirit of Christ. The following Sunday she spoke to Voysey and thanked him for the help he had given her, and in due course received from Mrs Voysey an invitation to visit them. She did so, and came into contact with a wider habit of thought which she could not but find refreshing. Voysey introduced her to Thomas Scott, then an old man, who after a remarkable life at the French Court and as a North American Indian—he had, too, hunted and fished all over the world—was spending both time and fortune in spreading freedom and truth by the free distribution of pamphlets, issued monthly, all heretical in matter, but in manner preserving an orthodox culture and polish. Mrs Besant not only discussed her difficulties with Mr and Mrs Scott, but mentioned her literary efforts and successes ; he invited her to submit an essay for publication.

During her visit she reached a definite point of disbelief. The great central problem round which the others all grouped was that of the existence of pain. ' It seemed so impossible to believe that a Creator could be either cruel enough to be indifferent to the misery, or weak enough to be unable to stop it. The old dilemma

faced me incessantly : " If He can prevent it and does not, He is not good ; if He wishes to prevent it and cannot, He is not almighty ".' Still she did not doubt the existence of God, but she did find her belief in the Deity of Christ definitely challenged. Step by step she had renounced the dogmas of the Bible's inspiration, of eternal punishment, and of the Atonement ; now the question arose: ' What think ye of Christ, whose son is he ? ' These other things gone, what good purpose could be served by the incarnation of a Son of God ?

It was a problem she hesitated to face. The Divine Figure of Christ was dear to her from its associations ; moreover, to reject Christ as God was to reject Christianity, and . . . she was a clergyman's wife ! In her dilemma she appealed to Pusey—for so many years a pillar of her faith—feeling that if he could not help her then all was lost indeed. At his invitation she journeyed to Oxford, and discovered him (then in his seventy-third year) ' a short, stout gentleman, dressed in a cassock, looking like a comfortable monk ; but keen eyes, steadfastly gazing straight into mine, told of the force and subtlety enshrined in the fine, impressive head '. His subtlety upon this occasion was little in evidence : ' He probably saw I was anxious, shy, and nervous, and he treated me as a penitent going to confession and seeking the advice of a director, instead of as an inquirer struggling after truth, and resolute to obtain some firm standing-ground in the sea of doubt.' He would not accept the Deity of Jesus as a question for argument, shrank from the suggestion of a possible imperfection in Jesus's character, and urged that she had read too much and must pray and have belief without demanding proof. But, Mrs Besant felt, ' I had not trodden the thorny path of doubt to come to the point from which I had started ; I needed, and would have, solid grounds

ere I believed. He had no conception of the struggles of a sceptical spirit; he had evidently never felt the pangs of doubt; his own faith was solid as a rock, firm, satisfied, unshakeable; he would as soon have committed suicide as have doubted the infallibility of the "Universal Church".

'"It is not your duty to ascertain the truth," he told me sternly. "It is your duty to accept and believe the truth as laid down by the Church. At your peril you reject it. The responsibility is not yours so long as you dutifully accept that which the Church has laid down for your acceptance. Did not the Lord promise that the presence of the Spirit should be ever with His Church, to guide her into all truth?"

'"But the fact of the promise and its value are just the very points on which I am doubtful," I answered.

'He shuddered. "Pray, pray," he said. "Father, forgive her, for she knows not what she says."'

One can but be charitable and hope that he at least knew not what he said, nor the implication of her presence before him. In him and in her the Catholic and the Protestant spirits faced each other, speaking different tongues, each totally failing to understand the other. Feeling that her mission had been useless, she told him that she could only go home and face her difficulties, openly leaving the Church, and taking the consequences. 'Then for the first time his serenity was ruffled. "I forbid you to speak of your disbelief," he cried. "I forbid you to lead into your own lost state the souls for whom Christ died."'

But when she returned to Sibsey she no longer doubted; she had rejected, and her essay, written for Scott a few months later, contained a reasoned statement of that rejection. Some may think that even at this point she might have compromised, but that was something for which she has never shown much aptitude, and

the spirit of the time was against it. It might proclaim with *The Family Herald* that ' he who will not reason is a bigot ; he who cannot is a fool ; and he who dares not is a slave ', but to the sceptic acting upon these sentiments it insisted : ' Those who believe in the authenticity of the Bible must accept the account of the birth and life and death of Christ as inspired *truth*, and will require no outside testimony to assure them ; those who reject the Gospels can have no interest in Christ, and can have no real desire to know anything of Him.' No compromise here ! The intellectual level of *The Family Herald* was scarcely that of Mrs Besant, though she took it seriously enough to write for it, but it probably *was* that of a great majority of mid-Victorian Christians—and certainly of the Rev Frank.

5

At Sibsey again in November 1872 she made a definite statement of her position to her husband. She was still, she declared, a Theist, and was ' willing to attend the Church services, taking no part in any not directed to God Himself, but I could not longer attend the Holy Communion, for in that service, full of recognition of Jesus as Deity and of His atoning sacrifice, I could no longer take part without hypocrisy '. Mr Besant accepted this arrangement, though unwillingly, and for some time her defection caused little talk even in the village, for when she left the church before the Communion Service it was naturally supposed that she was simply not well.

That winter she worked hard nursing the many victims in Sibsey of a typhoid fever epidemic, but characteristically she did not neglect the essay promised to Scott, and her first Freethought pamphlet was to her

great delight published in March 1873.* It is, if one accepts a purely logical and literal treatment of the subject, admirably done, well arranged, dealing with each point definitely and adequately, and passing on rapidly to the next. It examines the Christian claims of Jesus's divinity, the evidence of prophecy, and his infirmities of character and limited knowledge. She fully appreciates Jesus as a man, but rejects him definitely and indignantly as God.

But the delight in Sibsey Vicarage unfortunately was confined to herself; and in this connection there arises the first of many disputes—not only of interpretation but of fact—by which the details of the life-story of Mrs Besant are continually confused. There is scarcely a single controversy in which she has been involved which can be satisfactorily resolved. Giving evidence in court in 1878 she stated that while still at Sibsey she showed Frank Besant the manuscripts of the two pamphlets she wrote for Scott, and that he consented to their publication, stipulating only that her name should not appear. At the same time she declared that he 'was also aware of my opinions on social subjects, if by that is meant my Malthusian views, I having constantly pressed upon him the duty of limiting our family within our means'. But he replied that he had *never* consented to publication under any conditions; he had seen the manuscripts, expressed his disapproval, and—naturally!—imagined until the appearance of the printed pamphlets that that was the end of the matter. The statement that he was even aware of his wife's Malthusian views was wholly false.

To some extent Mrs Besant's contention is supported by the fact that the trouble that followed resulted from

* *On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth. An Enquiry into the Nature of Jesus by an Examination of the Synoptic Gospels.* By the Wife of a Beneficed Clergyman. Edited and Prefaced by the Rev Charles Voysey.

the interference of a relative of Mr Besant who had seen a copy of the pamphlet and knew its author. 'That gentleman did not disagree with it—indeed he admitted that all educated persons must hold the views put forward—but what would Society say? What would "the county families" think if one of the clerical party was known to be a heretic? . . . What would happen if the "wife of the beneficed clergyman" were identified with Mrs Besant of Sibsey?' * She agreed to give up writing to the Voyseys, but it seemed impossible that her identity could be suspected, and she completed the second pamphlet, which followed the lines of the first, but attacked especially the Fourth Gospel as unreliable, arrogant, bigoted, partial, and an insult to the *man* Jesus.† Soon she resumed correspondence with her London friends.

That spring took place one notable incident which surely indicates some inborn power of oratory. Curious one day to know what it felt like to preach, and convinced that she had a gift of speech, she went alone to Sibsey Church to practise organ exercises, locked the door, and went up into the pulpit to deliver to the empty pews of that 'great silent church' her first lecture on the inspiration of the Bible—the strangest, certainly, that ever echoed from its walls! 'I shall never forget the feeling of power and delight—but especially of power—that came upon me as I sent my voice ringing down the aisles, and the passion in me broke into balanced sentences and never paused for musical cadence or for rhythmical expression. . . . As the sentences flowed unbidden from my lips and my own tones echoed back to me from the pillars of the ancient church, I

* *Autobiographical Sketches.*

† '*According to St John.*' *On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth. Part II. A Comparison between the Fourth Gospel and the Three Synoptics.* By the Wife of a Beneficed Clergyman. Edited and Prefaced by Rev Charles Voysey.

knew of a verity that the gift of speech was mine, and that if ever—and then it seemed so impossible !—if ever the chance came to me of public work, this power of melodious utterance should at least win hearing for any message I had to bring.'

Things once more were working to a crisis. There was trouble about the second pamphlet, published in June. Again her health gave way, and she took the children to Southsea—no doubt to her father-in-law's house—to see if the change would do her good. It did not ; another complete breakdown sent her to her mother in London for expert medical attention. A doctor told her that she was suffering from general nervous exhaustion, accompanied by much disturbance of the functions of the heart. There was as yet no organic disease, but soon would be without complete change in her manner of life.

It was Frank Besant who, while she was still in London, took the next step. His amiable relative had again interfered, and her continued absence from Communion was causing comment at last ; he told her, after correspondence, that until she could conform to at least the outward observances of the Church she was not to return to Sibsey. Very well, she said, she would not return, and stood by her decision even when her mother knelt weeping at her feet, begging her to give way. ' In that worst crisis of blinding agony my will clung fast to Truth,' she says. For Mrs Besant such a motive was possibly sufficient ; yet one feels that it must have been a profound relief to get away at whatever cost from the Rev Frank. They had been always absolutely opposed in every way, and sooner or later they were bound to find each other's company intolerable. They had made their bed, but they could not lie in it. One does not suppose that he any more than she had found these five years of marriage a particularly happy time, but at least he

had the power, the money, and public opinion on his side.

Thus far Mrs Besant's life had been wholly private. With the rarest possible exceptions our sole source of information is her own writings, notably the *Autobiography* and the earlier *Autobiographical Sketches*. Now with the publication of her first pamphlets and the separation from her husband she enters at last upon her public career, and a certain—and increasing—amount of external comment becomes available. For example, Moncure Daniel Conway* and his wife had been interested to hear of the separation of the Besants as a result of her religious opinions. Mr Besant, they understood, had only a small income,† and could allow his wife, who had the care of their daughter, nothing. 'My wife,' Conway writes in his autobiography, 'at once invited her to come with her child and stay in our house until she could make satisfactory plans. The invitation was accepted. It filled us with astonishment that a young man should be willing to part from this beautiful and accomplished wife for the sake of any creed. She could not have been more than about twenty-seven years of age; her face was beautiful, its delicate oval and feminine sensibility were heightened by the simplicity and sincerity which come of good breeding and culture.'

* M. D. Conway was an American who, born in Virginia in 1832, came to England in 1863, and in the following year was appointed to South Place Chapel, where he remained, with one interval of eight years (1884–1892), until 1897. He began by abolishing prayer; he ended by abolishing God. Says Mr J. M. Robertson: 'South Place Chapel, under Conway, . . . constituted for the middle and upper class in London what the Hall of Science was for a more miscellaneous audience, a centre of living criticism which shaped minds and lives on all sides' (*The Life Pilgrimage of M. D. Conway*).

† The stipend has been variously stated as £410 and £450. But £8 a week for a country clergyman in 1873 was not exactly poverty.

When I was crawling on the floor,
Or, anyway, had not been long
In boyhood's breeks established—
(And had not yet burst into song
To bring the laurels to my head),
She had begun to wage the war
With human wrongs and misery,
To lighten every wretched lot;
Had filled the void and dried the tear,
Had put her finger on the spot
And said 'the pain is here and here';
Had bearded Doctors in their den,
And questioned hoar antiquity—
A stark denial to the strain
And longtime harped-upon refrain
That 'woman has not any brain',
That 'women must be led by men'.

From After Fifty Years by Lignus
(*New India*, Annie Besant Number, Aug. 25th, 1924)

III

PARIAH

I

IT SEEMS necessary at this point of Mrs Besant's first entry into public life to indicate briefly the main currents of ideas and forces which dominated English life and thought in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The century as a whole was a period of vast change in both intellectual and social conditions. The great intellectual influence was science, the great social influence the mechanical revolution and its results as embodied mainly in industrial development. The first consequence of the growth of large-scale industry was the emergence of the middle-class Liberals as a body powerful both politically and socially. The manufacturers, hitherto an unimportant class, began rapidly to acquire wealth and to compete upon equal terms, financially, with the old-established merchants and landowners. By comparison, the general level of the workers sank, and it was a new grouping which presently appeared. The first half of the century was one of struggle between Whigs and Tories; in the second half their opposition becomes less and less a vital one, and the two great classes which emerge are those of employers and employees, exploiters and exploited.

The first fifty years saw the victory of Liberalism. Following the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars the Tories (Conservatives) remained triumphantly in power until 1831. They stood for the preservation of monarchy, organized religion, social privilege, and obedience; they took full advantage of the general temper accompanying the romantic reaction, seeking in

religion, and the dogmatism of its evangelical forms, a force to check individualism and to lead the people back to an acceptance of established authority. The years about 1820 marked a climax of reaction in the passing of repressive Enclosure Acts, and Poor Relief and Corn Laws. A series of disastrous financial crises and panics occurring in 1815, 1818, and again in 1825, reduced the artisans and peasantry almost to starvation; England was perhaps nearer to revolution then than at any other time in her history.

Relief was bound to follow. The Whigs and Liberals stood for freedom and—in a rather vague and limited way—for equality. They supplanted the Conservatives in 1831; the Reform Bill passed in the next year was a step towards a democratic Parliament (its real effect was to give political power to the middle as opposed to the landowning classes), and to some extent relieved the general restlessness, and in the early thirties the Factory Commission was appointed.

Thenceforward the old nobility, the landed classes, the clergy, fought a losing battle. There was until 1848 much liberal thinking and writing within widening circles, though not much actual change and little development of thought among the masses as a whole. It might be said that this was a time mainly of preparation, and that it was later—from the sixties to the nineties—that there came the great irruption of new social, religious, and political ideas into the general European consciousness.

The year 1848 was a turning-point; a year of trouble at home and abroad. In France the Orléans monarchy was overthrown, and a second republic established. Italy and Hungary rose against the domination of Austria, the Poles against Prussia. In England the growing restlessness came to a head in the Chartist outbreak, so speedily and brutally suppressed. Here

and there the forces of revolution and reform achieved success, but as a whole the system, though staggered and startled, prevailed. There followed, naturally, reaction, and from that year may be dated the move towards a common acceptance of nationalist and imperialist aims. The feeling prevailed that progress must be slow and careful, that any suggestion of sudden change must be effectively dealt with. General content there was not, but for at least twenty years after 1848 there was little social disturbance. The Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny did nothing to shatter the surface placidity; they were both good old-fashioned wars—taking place a long way off, not exhausting, and ending in pleasant triumph. But it was a truce, and not a peace; there was no feeling of real security. In the realm of ideas, the evangelical stampede which followed the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 showed how ready people were to take fright. It has been said of the period just preceding the French Revolution that anything might be said because it seemed nothing would ever happen. Between the forties and the seventies, in religious and political circles, it was true rather that nothing might be said because anything might happen. Men were afraid to think lest their fancies should become facts, and escaping from their control turn and rend them.

The second and much more fundamental consequence of industrial development was at the time of Annie Besant's emergence only just beginning to take effect. Always before, the ruling classes had been content to maintain simply a supply of drudges; now, with the introduction of machinery, an increasing degree of education in the worker became necessary in the interests of efficiency. The totally illiterate ceased to be useful, and so in the second half of the century began a rapid extension of popular education. But as the workers were educated they became conscious of their condition,

they became articulate. So their demand for recognition grew, and with it came an increasing criticism of accepted economic ideas, of both the Tory ideal of benevolent feudal industrialism and the Liberal individualism and dislike of Government interference which was succeeding their first consideration for the workers. It became evident that the workers were a force not to be overlooked, and they found recognition in the later sixties in the further extension of the franchise. It was during this decade, with the establishment of this further measure of political democracy and the consolidation of the main existing national States, that European civilization entered upon its present chapter, dominated primarily and as a whole by business and industry; the imperialistic race for expansion—in essence a commercial matter of securing markets—entered upon its present phase. But the mere possession of the franchise, the workers discovered, was not in itself particularly significant or sufficient, and thus came about in the seventies and eighties a restlessness expressing itself in the various Radical and Secularist revolts and culminating in the more constructive revival of Socialist ideas, and the inevitable birth of modern class-consciousness.

2

We have recorded how, when Mrs Besant decided not to return to her husband, her mother begged her upon her knees to give way. Mrs Wood did not understand the significance of that decision, but she did understand 'far more fully than I did all that a separation from my home meant for me, and the difficulties that would surround a young woman, not yet twenty-six, living alone. She knew how brutally the world judges, and how the mere fact that a woman was young and

alone justified any coarseness of slander. Then I did not guess how cruel men and women could be, how venomous their tongues.'

She was to learn quickly and to suffer long. As a woman alone she would have done so, but the position she took up as a Secularist and a Radical, and in particular her association with Bradlaugh, naturally made things very much worse; the great British public—particularly its more respectable sections—drew its own generous conclusions, and harlot, she says, was not the worst of titles privately and publicly awarded her. In the seventies and eighties the Women's Suffrage movement did not dare accept her aid—mainly on account of her repudiation of Christianity—and Stead has recalled how in the eighties, when he wished to quote a letter from her in the first number of *The Review of Reviews*, he had to fight the objections of the management, which urged that it would cost them hundreds of subscribers. At that time, he adds, it was still considered scarcely correct to allude to her 'except in the most distant manner, as if she inhabited another and improper world'. Yet 'never, in all the prolonged litigations in which Mrs Besant has been engaged, has there ever been any imputation cast upon her personal character. For whatever breach of conjugal contract there was she was not to answer. And since the separation, although she has been tracked by detectives, enveloped in a cloud of scandal, and made the mark for every calumniator, no human being has ever ventured to stand up in public and attempt to substantiate a single accusation against the character of Mrs Besant.' * There are many, even to-day, who cannot forget that legendary past, yet Stead's statement must be taken as final. What Mrs Besant was she has always been ready frankly to declare, and there seems no reason or justification for seeking

* *Review of Reviews*, October 1891.

behind this fully acknowledged public existence, as though it were a concealing mask. There can be very few women who have existed with so little of a private life; there lies the secret of her vitality, her efficiency, her ability to achieve. Her public life has been her whole life—which is not to say that she has not been capable of great devotions, to individuals as well as to causes.

She spent some weeks with the Conways, until in spite of secretarial work she began to worry about remaining longer. Her brother appears to have been not very sympathetic, though he was able, on certain facts coming accidentally to his knowledge, to establish grounds of action against Mr Besant and to procure his sister a legal separation which gave her a small monthly income—'sufficient for respectable starvation'—and the guardianship of her daughter. This was in October 1873. He offered her a home on condition that she gave up her heretical friends and 'kept quiet', but she had not left one bondage to enter another. Yet independence, she found, was not to be had for the asking, and her quest for employment was not immediately successful; some weeks of fancy needlework earned four shillings and sixpence! Mabel went to her father for a short while, but returned on November 4th. Mrs Besant was determined that they should have a home where Mrs Wood too could be with them, and after arranging to take a small house in Colby Road, Gipsy Hill, in Upper Norwood, from the following Easter, she went with Mabel on a visit to Folkestone, where Mrs Morris and two of her daughters were living. There, for three months, she was employed by the local vicar, nominally as governess but actually as head cook and nurse. She received as payment her own and Mabel's board and lodging. In January, Mabel was sent to her grandmother again, one of the vicar's children having

diphtheria. Mrs Besant stayed to nurse first that patient and then another (scarlet fever), and as soon as they were well, in February, went to London to her brother's home to nurse her mother, who was dangerously ill. Mrs Wood recovered to some extent, but it was evident that she had not long to live.

At this time, while still at the brother's house, Mrs Besant took the Sacrament for the last time. Her mother was anxious to communicate, but refused to without Annie. Again compromise was impossible, and the problem was to find a broad-minded clergyman. Two were consulted, but would do nothing; at last Annie went in despair to Dean Stanley, and told him her difficulties frankly. He was, to her vast surprise and relief, sufficiently unorthodox to accede to her request, and even to assert that conduct was more important—far more important—than faith, and that he regarded all as Christians who recognized and tried to follow the moral law of Christ. He called three times to see the dying woman, and by the third visit Mrs Besant had recovered sufficiently from her astonishment to ask him how, with such views, he could stay within the Church. 'I think,' he answered, 'that I am of more service to true religion by remaining in the Church and striving to widen its boundaries from within, than if I left it and worked from without.' It is interesting to recall that when Stead, many years later, told Canon Liddon the story of this last communion, the Canon shuddered with horror at the mere thought of such sacrilege.

Early in May the invalid was moved to the house at Norwood, in hope that the purer air would do her good. But the journey exhausted her, and a few days later she died. During one of those last days, as she lay slowly sinking into delirium and towards death, she told her daughter: 'My little one, you have never made me sad or sorry except for your own sake; you have always been

too religious.' And then she murmured, as though to herself: 'Yes, it has been darling Annie's only fault; she has always been too religious.' A strange comment Annie's partisans and enemies of the next few years would have thought it, and yet perhaps one of the truest ever made.

The few months following her mother's death—from May to August—were, she has said, the dreariest of her life. Poverty beset her as well as sorrow; as her mother had made sacrifices for her in past years, so now she sacrificed herself for Mabel, to give her enough to eat. Her brother * fades altogether out of her story, and but for her daughter, Aunt Minnie, and Mr and Mrs Scott, she was altogether alone. For Scott she continued to write pamphlets; his large library was freely at her disposal; he led her on by suggestion and criticism to study one point after another. She had treated of the Atonement, the Mediation and Salvation of Ecclesiastical Christianity, of Eternal Torture, of Inspiration, of the Religious Education of Children, of Natural Religion as opposed to Revealed Religion. She had long discarded Christianity, and thought, study, and discussion brought her at last to face the question of whether God, in any ordinary meaning of the word, could be said to exist. She asked her friend and publisher one day:

'"Mr Scott, may I write a tract on the nature and existence of God?"

'He glanced at me keenly. "Ah, little lady, you are facing, then, that problem at last. I thought it must come. Write away."'

She wrote, applying 'reasoning' and 'stern logic'

* Sir Henry Trueman Wood died on January 7th, 1929, having served the Society of Arts for nearly half a century as secretary (1879–1917), treasurer (1917), and chairman of the Council (1919). He held other responsible posts, and displayed organizing and administrative ability. He published a history of the Society and other historical and technical works, and was knighted in 1890.

to the problem whether there can be 'a God at all in the sense in which the word is generally used', as implying a 'magnified man'. She came to the conclusion that the pantheistic conception of the universe as one in essence must be accepted, and that thus 'the Deity becomes identified with nature, co-extensive with the universe; but the *God* of the orthodox no longer exists; we may change the signification of God, and use the word to express a different idea, but we can no longer mean by it a personal being in the orthodox sense, possessing an individuality which divides Him from the rest of the universe'. Proceeding farther, she declared that there is no 'idea of God, worthy to be called an idea, which is attainable in the present state of our faculties'. Nevertheless 'we pretend to know the Unknown if we declare Him to be the Unknowable. Unknowable to us at present, yes! Unknowable for ever, in other possible stages of existence?—We have reached a region into which we cannot penetrate; here all human faculties fail us; we bow our heads on "the threshold of the unknown".' *

This tentative position she had already reached before her meeting with Bradlaugh, which took place while the essay was still in manuscript. In the printed version she accepts quite frankly the Atheist position—that 'Atheism is *without* God. It does not assert *no* God'—but this was a change made in the writing. She had accepted until then the 'vulgar error' that the Atheist did assert 'there is no God', as she had accepted the popular prejudice against Charles Bradlaugh as 'rather a rough sort of speaker'. It was Mrs Moncure Conway who told her: 'He is the finest speaker of Saxon-English that I have ever heard, except perhaps John Bright, and his power over a crowd is something marvellous. Whether you agree with him or not, you

* *On the Nature and the Existence of God.*

should hear him.' Some months later, in the mid-July of 1874, she bought a copy of *The National Reformer* and learned of the existence of the National Secular Society. She wrote to Bradlaugh asking whether it was necessary to profess Atheism to become a member, and learning that it was not, immediately joined. On the evening of Sunday, August 2nd, she went to the Hall of Science in Old Street, there for the first time to see Bradlaugh in the flesh. He lectured on *The Ancestry and Birth of Jesus*. The hall was crowded, the audience enthusiastic, and Mrs Besant, who knew enough of his subject to appreciate the skilful treatment of it, was carried away by his oratory and the impression made by ' the grave, quiet, stern, strong face, the massive head, the keen eyes, the magnificent breadth and height of forehead '. The lecture over, he came down the emptying hall, certificates in hand, to distribute them. He mentioned her question about Atheism, and invited her to visit him in his Camberwell lodging to discuss the subject. There, a few days later, he read the manuscript of her essay and told her that she had thought herself into Atheism without knowing it. Her rejection of Christianity was already complete ; now she accepted as completely an Atheism based upon the intellectual as the final judgment. This acceptance was the basis of her whole rationalist position.

3

Charles Bradlaugh at this time was in his forty-first year ; he was the spearhead of the English Freethought movement of the day. He was entirely a self-made man, and he had risen to prominence against continuous opposition. At fifteen, after a childhood of pious acceptance, he became a Sunday school teacher and was

directed to prepare for confirmation; thus he was brought to his first detailed study of the Gospels and the Thirty-nine Articles. Like Mrs Besant, he had no external incentive to doubt or criticize, but his keen eye for evidence noted contradictions; he went to question the clergyman upon whom the charge of his soul was laid —and without further ado was cast out from the Sunday school as an Atheist. Thus he was driven to spend church time listening to Freethinking open-air speakers, and was converted to Deism. The Church was soon upon his track, offering him the alternatives of recanting or losing his job. Again like Mrs Besant he settled the matter by leaving home. At seventeen he joined the army, but his discharge was bought after three years and he became office-boy and then clerk to a solicitor, thus gaining his first experience of legal work and procedure. His respect for the law was tremendous; he was radical, republican, freethinker—but he remained always far more strictly constitutional than most of his opponents. Also, incidentally, he seems to have known the law better than most of them. His activities as public speaker necessarily aroused opposition; the reaction from the French Revolution was still effective, and still more so—in this country—was the reaction from Chartism. He had many hard battles to fight, but by 1859—still only twenty-six—he was noted by a newspaper as a favourite orator with 'the noisier Democrats'. It was in 1868 that he first stood as a Parliamentary candidate at Northampton and was heavily defeated, much prejudice being roused against him by his advocacy of the enfranchisement of women. Every force of social and religious prejudice was against him, and the workers who supported him were, unfortunately, mostly still without votes. He stood again in 1873 and 1874, each time defeated but adding to his followers; not until 1880 did victory reward his persistence.

All this time his sole income was derived from journalism, lecturing, and the sales of pamphlets; his life was a continual battle, he was constantly involved in legal disputes, and consequently always in debt. Yet he managed to survive and to build up his own Freethought organization in the National Secular Society, his own newspaper in *The National Reformer*. This he founded in 1860; it outlived many difficulties, and by 1874 had a circulation extending to many parts of the world, and was paying its way if not making much profit. He, in fact, and with him the whole Freethought movement, was beginning at the time of Mrs Besant's adhesion to make headway, and slowly increasing in activity and prosperity. By twenty years of superhuman labour he had broken the keen edge of attack. In practically every large town branches of the N.S.S. were established, and among the workers were sufficient numbers of 'Bradlaugh's men' to prevent the once frequent attempts at physical violence. He had the power of arousing a personal devotion—not to say a personal hatred—such as no public figure can claim to-day; like Mrs Besant he was throughout his life a storm-centre of contrary emotions. 'Of Bradlaugh,' Bernard Shaw has written, 'history has so far given every description except the only one that fits him. He was quite simply a hero; a single champion of anti-Christendom against the seventy-seven champions of Christendom. He was not a leader: he was a wonder whom men followed and obeyed. He was a terrific opponent, making his way by an overwhelming personal force which reduced his most formidable rivals to pigmies.' * From the sixties to the eighties, to quote another account, 'he was undoubtedly the most formidable and imposing platform figure in the country. Tall, powerful, and well-shaped in body, his face was that of a

* *Dr Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work.*

huge bull-dog with the upper lip drawn down instead of being turned up. And he had all the qualities of the animal he resembled when fully aroused. No man of our time fought a harder uphill fight than Bradlaugh. Not content with being an ardent Radical he was at the same time, as all the world knows, a most pugnacious and persistent Secularist. It is not too much to say that, though not possessed of the literary capacity of Watts or Foote, the scientific knowledge of Aveling or McCabe, or the charm of oratory which distinguished Annie Besant, he was at that time the real inspirer and organizer of the Secularist party in Great Britain.' * Undoubtedly this was true ; they were the hands, the feet, the eloquent lips, but he remained to the end the backbone, and he was no sooner dead than the active limbs fell apart in bitter controversy. Hyndman adds : 'That he was more than a little of a bully and a despot, as well as a capable and courageous leader, cannot be disputed.' It need not be. Every effective leader under such circumstances must be a despot and a bully; this is one lesson Mrs Besant clearly learnt from him.

Yet probably she less than any other of his constant workers encountered this aspect of his character, precisely because of them all she came closest to him. Theirs was far more than a professional association. It happened that their first contact occurred when she was doubly alone after her mother's death, and his friend of many years, Austin Holyoake, had died that same spring. She came to him as a new comrade to take the old one's place. 'They were mutually attracted,' his daughter has recorded, 'and a friendship sprang up between them of so close a nature that had both been free it would undoubtedly have ended in marriage.' †

* *Record of an Adventurous Life*, by H. M. Hyndman.
† *Charles Bradlaugh*, by Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner.

Bradlaugh did not live with his wife, who was a dipsomaniac ; his constant financial difficulties precluded him from exercising any effective supervision, and so she stayed practically continuously with her own parents in the country.* He never made any open statement of these domestic details ; the mere fact of the separation gave rein to his enemies' imaginations—people then were no less avid for sexual scandals than they are to-day—and his friendship with Mrs Besant was a blessed gift to them. But such ' insult and calumny ' served only to bring the two closer together, and from 1874 to Bradlaugh's death, Mrs Besant has said,† no one knew him or shared his life more intimately than she. They not only worked but played together, walking and driving to Richmond, Windsor, Kew, Hampton Court, Maidenhead, and Taplow, or going even farther afield to Broxbourne upon fishing excursions. They were companions as well as fellow-workers.

4

While visiting Bradlaugh at Camberwell Mrs Besant returned his invitation, asking him to come to see her at Norwood. For a while he refused, giving her fair warning that ' he was so hated by English society that

* He was unfortunate in his family ; his younger brother, W. R. Bradlaugh, offers an interesting example of the Christian sub-mentality of the time. A drunkard and embezzler, in 1875 he ' found salvation ' at a Moody and Sankey meeting, and forthwith, making the most of his name, became a prolific pamphleteer and lecturer, working in special opposition to his brother, for whose soul he would pray publicly. His tracts survive only as curiosities of the age : in argument he never sought even to discern his opponent's current of opinion ; he preferred to drown himself in a mere eddy of words. For a time he edited *The Anti-Infidel*, a monthly magazine which proclaimed the ' infidelity ' not only of Atheists but of Unitarians and Catholics.

† *Review of Reviews*, March 1891.

any friend of his would be certain to suffer, and that I should pay heavily for any friendship extended to him '. But she was insistent ; he came, and at the same time offered her a place as contributor and general assistant on the staff of *The National Reformer* at a weekly salary of a guinea. She needed the money, and she wished to join hands with the great man she recognized him to be, but it was a bold step to take so suddenly. Many even of her Freethinking friends were distressed by her new alliance, and Mr Scott thought it best that she should adopt a pseudonym in *The National Reformer* until the pamphlets actually in hand and bearing her name had been published. Later, in 1875, she used her name in the paper, but the seven or eight remaining Scott pamphlets, beginning with that *On the Nature and the Existence of God*, were anonymous. Her work, it is said, widened the appeal of the paper and increased its circulation. She remained a regular contributor until Bradlaugh's death in 1891 ; she was sub-editor from 1877 onward, and from 1881 to 1887 her name appeared with Bradlaugh's as co-editor.

Her first contributions to the Secularist weekly appeared in the issue dated August 30th, 1874 : they were a book review and the first of a series of notes upon current topics under the general title of *Daybreak*, both signed ' Ajax '. In that same month, on August 25th, she gave her first public lecture at the Co-operative Institute in Castle Street, off Oxford Street. Her subject was *The Political Status of Women*, and though she recalls her nervousness up to the moment of facing the audience, Bradlaugh thought it probably the best speech by a woman he had ever heard. A month later she spoke again, at a chapel in Camden Town, on *The True Basis of Morality*. This lecture was repeated once elsewhere, then for the rest of the year she did no more public speaking. At the end of September she accompanied

Bradlaugh to Northampton, where he was standing for the third time as Parliamentary candidate. She reported the election for *The National Reformer*, and gave what 'silent' assistance she could. Bradlaugh's election sheet, *The Radical*, in its second number (Saturday, October 4th 1874), makes acknowledgments to 'Mrs Annie Besant, a lady well known in the literary world, for the following note of incidents . . .' Throughout the election much bad feeling prevailed, and upon the proclamation of Bradlaugh's defeat, there was a free fight and an attack on the Liberal headquarters. Bradlaugh went straight from Northampton to America; Mrs Besant returned home the next day to go to bed with congestion of the lungs.

Again an illness—perhaps because it gave her what ordinarily she had too little of, time for thought—seemed to mark a period. Once before she had risen from her bed determined to proclaim herself before God; this time she rose determined to proclaim herself before men, 'to give myself wholly to propagandist work as a Freethinker and a social reformer, and to use my tongue as well as my pen in the struggle. . . . The desire to spread liberty and truer thought among men, to war against bigotry and superstition, to make the world freer and better than I found it—all this impelled me with a force that would not be denied. I seemed to hear the voice of Truth ringing over the battle-field: "Who will go? Who will speak for me?" And I sprang forward with passionate enthusisasm, with resolute cry: "Here am I, send me!"' This was essentially the spirit in which Mrs Besant and Bradlaugh faced the enemy; it was, as Shaw says, simply heroic, and like most heroes they had no doubts of themselves. Mrs Besant has been accused many times of caring too little for criticism. Why should she care, when she knows that she is right? That is another of the secrets of her efficiency.

As always, when she gave herself it was wholeheartedly. The engagements of Freethought speakers were announced regularly in *The National Reformer*, and from this time forward her list of forthcoming lectures far exceeded that of any other, even Bradlaugh. In January 1875 she publicly identified herself with 'Ajax', and began her new career with a lecture at South Place Chapel on *Civil and Religious Liberty*.* In February she started on her first provincial tour, and for the rest of the year—one might say almost for the next two years—there was scarcely a month when she did not travel far and lecture repeatedly. In some months she visited as many as twenty towns, speaking more than once in some of them, and sometimes travelling hundreds of miles between two lectures. In October 1875 her engagements extended more than six months ahead. Mrs Besant has dealt with her lecturing experiences at some length in her *Autobiography*; the subject need not be elaborated here. Let it suffice to say that she went about the country speaking upon religion and politics, greeted alternately with cheers and stones, but making everywhere a deep and deepening impression. It was a magnificent training for her later career.

There could be no question of her success as a lecturer. From the first, favourable comments appeared: she was declared unequalled for force and eloquence (at Aberdeen they found her power as a speaker a strong contrast to her deceptive gentleness of manner and appearance), and when she spoke for the first time in the Hall of Science—the London centre of Freethought and Radicalism—on *The Gospel of Christianity and the Gospel of Freethought* (February 28th 1875) the audience, acccustomed as it was to the trained eloquence of

* One very favourable notice of this lecture was written for an influential London paper, but Sir (then Mr) Walter Besant secured the suppression of her name, so that she gained nothing. There was much of this 'underhand antagonism'.

Bradlaugh and other leaders, at the end of her eloquent peroration cheered again and again. Tom Mann heard her speak in 1875: 'Mrs Besant transfixed me; her superb control of voice, her whole-souled devotion to the cause she was advocating, her love of the down-trodden, and her appeal on behalf of a sound education for all children, created such an impression upon me that I quietly, but firmly, resolved that I would ascertain more correctly the why and wherefore of her creed.' * Bradlaugh's daughter, Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, recalls her 'as very fluent, with a great command of language, and her voice carried well; her throat, weak at first, rapidly gained in strength, until she became a most forcible speaker'. She herself loved speaking; it gave her a deep personal pleasure and sense of power, and, moreover, she always made sure that she had something to say when she spoke. For, remembering Miss Marryat, she pledged her word 'to the cause I loved that no effort on my part should be wanted to render myself worthy of the privilege of service that I took; that I would read and study, and would train every faculty that I had; that I would polish my language, discipline my thought, widen my knowledge; and this, at least, I may say, that if I have written and spoken much, I have studied and thought more, and that I have not given to my mistress Truth that which cost me nothing.' Here again she exhibited that inborn temperamental advantage which Mrs Bonner also stresses: 'Tireless as a worker, she could both write and study longer without rest and respite than any other person I have known; and such was her power of concentration that she could work under circumstances which would have confounded almost every other person.'

It was at this time that Bradlaugh's influence was of the greatest possible help to her; it was primarily

* *Memoirs*, by Tom Mann.

practical. He set before her an example of what patience, strength, and certainty may accomplish. Spiritually he was rigid ; in the seventies he was already set, while she was still developing. For a time his effect upon her must have been profound, but her destiny was beyond his. He educated her in public attack and defence, taught her the importance of understanding every side of a case, but could not limit her. 'Through our long comradeship he was my sternest as well as my gentlest critic, pointing out to me that in a party like ours, where our own education and knowledge were above those whom we led, it was very easy to gain indiscriminate praise and unstinted admiration ; on the other hand, we received from Christians equally indiscriminate abuse and hatred. It was, therefore, needful that we should be our own harshest judges, and that we should be sure that we knew thoroughly every subject that we taught. He saved me from the superficiality that my "fatal facility" of speech might so easily have induced ; and when I began to taste the intoxication of easily won applause, his criticism of weak points, his challenge of weak arguments, his trained judgment, were of priceless service to me, and what of value there is in my work is very largely due to his influence, which at once stimulated and restrained.' Her 'quick impulsive nature found in him the restful strength it needed, and learned from him the self-control it lacked.'

The Secularist movement was not wealthy, but with lectures, pamphlets, and her work for *The National Reformer*—the regular *Daybreak* article, book reviews, and numerous other articles, both signed and unsigned —Mrs Besant's financial position began to improve, and in November 1874 she was able to move to Bayswater, a more convenient centre for her work. In the following November Mabel's education began—she was just five

years old—her mother's favourite aunt, Marion Frances Morris, coming to her as a daily governess. In July 1876 another move was made to St John's Wood, Miss Morris coming to live there as resident governess for Mabel—and companion too for her mother, for by this time her other relations, Besants, Woods, and Morrises, had severed all connection with her. Probably the first shock and sorrow once over, she did not mind much; she was moving forward to horizons they did not, could not, know. A woman's place, they would have told her, is in the home; but Mrs Besant's home was the universe.

5

A detailed examination of Mrs Besant's writings at this period is scarcely necessary here, but at least the position which she and Bradlaugh defended, the principles they fought for, must be made clear. The first fundamental point to insist upon is the essentially practical moral basis of her attitude. Her change from Christianity to Atheism was a turning from responsible God to responsible man, to a belief in man, 'in man's redeeming powers; in man's remoulding energy; in man's approaching triumph, through knowledge, love, and work'. She sought in her new belief, though liberty, no element of licence; in her lectures delivered for the National Secular Society during these years 'no subject was more frequently dealt with than that of human ethical growth and the duty of man to man. No thought was more constantly in my mind than that of the importance of morals.' In the latter part of her essay *On the Nature and the Existence of God* she declared: 'When we admit that God is beyond our knowing morality becomes at once necessarily grounded on

utility, or the natural adaptation of certain feelings and actions to promote the general welfare of society.' * The token of righteousness must be not prayer but work. 'True, our creed is a stern one.' Upon this belief were based the next few pamphlets written for Scott. She pleads the case for *Euthanasia* from the point of view of social benefit; she expands the case for the usefulness of work as opposed to the selfish self-indulgence of prayer; she suggests that Rationalism is far more constructive than supernaturalism in that by focusing attention upon this world it becomes the motive power of a 'steady flow of loving and energetic work for man, work that begins in the family, and spreads in ever-widening circles over the whole race'.† Her first pamphlet issued by Bradlaugh's publisher in 1874 was *The True Basis of Morality*, in which she urged that 'only utility can afford us a sure basis, the reasonableness of which will be accepted alike by thoughtful students and hardheaded artisans. Utility appeals to all alike, and sets in action motions which are found equally in every human heart. Well shall it be for humanity that creeds and dogmas pass away, that superstition vanishes, and the clear light of freedom and science dawns on the regenerated earth—but well only if men draw tighter and closer the links of trustworthiness, of honour, and of truth'. And finding that 'utility' was being interpreted too narrowly, she explained that for her the term 'includes all art; for art cultures the taste and refines the nature. It thus adds a thousand charms to life, deepens, softens, purifies human happiness. . . . In a word, utility includes everything which is *useful* in building up a grander manhood

* See in this connection her Theosophical booklet, *The Basis of Morality* (1915), in which she rejects in turn Revelation, Intuition, and Utility (which fails because it 'does not inspire') to take as her basis Evolution, which in fact, unless one presupposes some 'revealed' knowledge of the evolutionary goal, is indistinguishable from Utility.

† *Constructive Rationalism*,

and womanhood, wiser, purer, truer, tenderer than we have to-day.'

But there was another aspect also touched upon in that decisive and seminal essay *On the Nature and the Existence of God*, the need for fighting superstitions because they hinder the advancement of the race. The ground had to be cleared of weeds, the old rubbish swept away. And so we have, written for Scott in 1876, pamphlets upon *The Beauties of the Prayer Book*, and *The Church of England Catechism*, in both of which she scores, if upon a low level: 'It will, perhaps, be considered hypercritical to object to the versicles: "Give peace in our time, O Lord, *because* there is none other that fighteth for us but only Thou, O God." What more do they want than an almighty reinforcement? "None other?" Well, we should have fancied that God *and* somebody else were really more than were needed. At any rate it sounds very insulting to say to God, "please give us peace, since we cannot count on any assistance except yours." We have nothing to say about the prayers for the Royal Family, except that they do not show any very attractive results.' This angle of attack was developed in her contribution to *The Freethinker's Text-Book* (1876) where she assailed organized Christianity as unreliable in its evidence, pagan in its origin, fallible in its morality, and brutal and bloodthirsty in its historical record. She ends with a joyful anticipation of the new day when 'Freethought shall plant the white banner of Liberty in the midst of the temple of Humanity, that temple which, long desecrated by priests and overshadowed by gods, shall then be consecrated for evermore to the service of its rightful owner, and shall be filled with the glory of man, the only god, and shall have its air melodious with the voice of the prayer which is work.' She and her friends, it seems, lived in the constant expectation of some such dawn. It would be

unkind to suggest that when it came it found her all too often already fled to proclaim some more hopeful horizon.

Until 1877 the controversy, on her side at least, was if impatient in tone good-tempered enough. She scoffed, but probably she smiled as she wrote, for she has never been devoid of humour. But under continued persecution and with the taking of her daughter she ceased to smile. The pamphlet, *Is the Bible Indictable? An Enquiry whether the Bible Comes within the Ruling of the Lord Chief Justice* (1877), is the direct retort to the first adverse verdict in the Knowlton case. It lists the obscene passages of the Bible—what a number there are when one comes to look for them !—and demands a prosecution of the Bible equally with *The Fruits of Philosophy*, adding, of course, that ' the right way would be to prosecute none of these books '. *The Fruits of Christianity* (1878) is another historical survey of persecutions by the Christian Church ; it is outspoken and bitter. *Christian Progress* (1878) deals rather heavy-handedly with the coarser elements in the earlier English hymnals. Her own contributions to a secular hymnal, however, must be noted as downright rather than poetic :

> Has England forgotten Cromwell's teaching ?
> Is Hampden's poured-out blood all in vain ?
> Shall a land which saw a king's impeaching
> Now be bound by a Brunswick chain ?
> Our sires veil their faces in shame
> For the sons who disgrace their name :
> Who bow to a crowned thing,
> To a puppet they call a king.

The Christian Creed ; or, What it is Blasphemy to Deny (1883) notes an evident Christian desire to make blasphemy an indictable offence, and comments, with something more than a sparkle of humour, that ' if we are

to burn for ever hereafter, the Christians might really allow us to enjoy ourselves here'. *Biblical Biology* (1884) is a brief critical 'contribution to a religious non-science'—which one half suspects of being a very bad pun. *The Natural History of Christian the Devil* (1885) was a propaganda by-product. It mentions the contemporary case of a would-be communicant who was 'repelled from the Lord's Table' because he disbelieved in the Devil; he appealed to the law courts and obtained a decision 'that belief in Satan was not a necessary preliminary for the faithful receiving of Christ'. *The Myth of the Resurrection* (1886) needs no explaining. *God's Views on Marriage as Revealed in the Old Testament* (1890) was a retort—most of these pamphlets are essentially retorts—to a statement made by the Bishop of Manchester that Freethinkers advocated free love; it shows that Biblical views of marriage are scarcely exalted.

All these pamphlets represent the negative side of the Atheist position, the attempt to discredit Christian dogma. It would be idle to pretend that their intellectual level is high. The attack throughout is undeniably on the letter rather than the spirit; it is materialistic, exactly as the prevailing thought of the period was materialistic. One feels in an enormous amount of this religious controversy that the essential points were being thrust aside in favour of mere verbal quibbling. The controversialists rarely met upon the same ground; theirs was a happy game of round and round the mulberry-bush, never overtaking one another, never getting anywhere. Christianity, one might almost say, is rarely discussed; the subject of debate is practically always the dogmas of the Church. That is, possibly, the real reason why they seem so tedious to read to-day; the old issues have ceased to signify, and most of the actual writing is as lacking in individuality as writing can be. That such propaganda need not be so both Shaw

and Upton Sinclair have shown us, but for all her ability to gather and arrange facts and to expound them in flowing language Mrs Besant's pamphlets cannot be recommended as light reading. To-day they are—most of them—as dead as doornails.

The pamphlets which assert the positive aspect of Atheism are, comparatively, much more interesting. A quotation from *The Gospel of Christianity and the Gospel of Freethought* (1877) states an attitude at least ethically superior to the Christian: 'I have myself heard the question asked: "Why should I seek for truth, and why should I lead a good life, if there is no immortality in which to reap a reward?" To this question the Freethinker has one clear and short answer: "There is no reason why you should seek Truth, if to you the search has no attracting power. There is no reason why you should lead a noble life, if you find your happiness in leading a poor and a base one". . . . If Truth is not loved for her own pure sake, if to lead a noble life, if to make men happier, if to spread brightness around us, if to leave the world better than we found it—if these aims have no attraction for us, if these thoughts do not inspire us, then we are not worthy to be Secularists, we have no right to the proud title of Freethinkers. If you want to be paid for your good lives by living for ever in a lazy and useless fashion in an idle heaven; if you want to be bribed into nobility of life; if, like silly children, you learn your lessons not to gain knowledge but to win sugar-plums, then you had better go back to your creeds and your churches; they are all you are fit for; you are not worthy to be free. But we—who, having caught a glimpse of the beauty of Truth, deem the possession of her worth more than all the world beside; who have made up our minds to do our work ungrudgingly, asking for no reward beyond the results which spring up from our labour—we will spread the gospel of Freethought

among men, until the sad minor melodies of Christianity have sobbed out their last mournful notes on the dying evening breeze, and on the fresh morning winds shall ring out the chorus of hope and joyfulness, from the glad lips of men whom the Truth has at last set free.' Again, in an article on *The Aim of Life*,* she states that 'the aim of life is to help consciously, with full recognition, in the upward evolution of men'. This is to be done by individual culture, by helping others, and 'by willing, hearty aid towards every movement which aims at the raising of the people as a whole, by placing education within the reach of all, by making unnecessary hopeless poverty, by improving the health, comfort, and enjoyment of the masses of our brothers and sisters'. To ask whether such a life is worth while she calls a preposterous question. 'Is the sunshine worth having? Is the glory of mountain, of wood, of lake, worth gazing at?' In effect she argues that life must be valued, and made worth living, for its own sake.

The quest of Freethinkers and Christians alike is for an absolute. Freethinkers would find it here and now —Christian theology puts it off a stage. It all comes, in fact if not in practice, to the same thing—except that the Freethinkers seem more honest with themselves.

It was mainly her insistence upon life being valuable for its own sake that roused against her the opposition of Society. Heaven must be won here and now, 'through knowledge, love, and work'. Thus Atheism and Radicalism were, for her, vitally connected. 'To whom then is Atheism dangerous? It is dangerous to the unfairly wealthy, to those who regard human beings as machines to win gold for their masters; to them it is dangerous, for Atheism means justice. It is dangerous to superstition, to ignorance, and to the classes that prey upon the credulity of their neighbours; to them it

* N.S.S. *Almanack*, 1884.

is dangerous, for Atheism means knowledge. It is dangerous to the oppressor, to the tyrant who builds his throne out of the bodies of the slain citizens, and who twines his crown out of the thorns of their distress; to him it is dangerous, for Atheism means liberty. It recognizes no king in heaven and no king on earth; it knows naught of a priesthood and naught of a right divine. Marvel not, then, that against Atheism should arise all monopoly of privilege, all possession of ill-gotten gains, all tyranny in the Church and State. Marvel not that against Atheism kings fulminate laws and priests thunder damnation; for Atheism shakes every throne and undermines every church; Atheism strikes at every mitre, and Atheism shivers every crown.' *

Thus she was brought to attack the Church from not only the doctrinal but the political point of view. *The Sins of the Church* (1886) is a series of seven pamphlets designed to forward the movement for the disestablishment of the English, Scottish, and Welsh Churches. With the Reformation, she declares, the Church became 'a mere creature of the Crown' and of Parliament, 'a burden on labour'. Even in the General Election of 1885 its influence was thrown upon the side of the Tories. 'In one London parish, it is said, the clergyman told the women at a mother's meeting that there would be no blankets or Christmas beef for those whose husbands voted for the Liberal candidate.'

She was, naturally, a whole-hearted Republican; she would have abolished not only Royalty but the House of Lords too. 'Whether an Upper House is wanted at all is a matter to me extremely doubtful, but there can be no doubt whatever that if there is to be a Senate it should be wholly composed of those who are peers by right of merit, and not by right of birth. . . . That

* *Gospel of Atheism.*

Great Britain will become a republic none can doubt; the only question is—when?' *

As a Radical she attacked the English land system, of the evils of which she had had some practical experience. She declared the interests of tenant-farmers and labourers identical—the landlords, who took all and gave nothing back, were the enemies of both. She demanded the State-ownership of the land, and pointed out that the improvement of the labourer's conditions would benefit the farmer too. In this connection she wrote a series of five lectures—*Free Trade* v. *Fair Trade* (1881)—attacking as landlord-raised the agitation for a return to Protection, the object being to distract working-class attention from the necessity of a Radical reform of the Land Tenure. In her insistence upon the right of the workers to own the land and the wealth their labour produces, the Socialist tendency is marked. As an anti-Imperialist she attacked British policy in India and in the Soudan. After Gordon's death, she replied to the Press eulogies by quoting his own letters to show that he was neither hero nor saint nor martyr, but simply an honest soldier of no great distinction. A pricking of popular bubbles was all part of the day's work. From the beginning she advocated Home Rule for Ireland, and she issued several pamphlets protesting against the policy of coercion pursued there by Conservative and Liberal Governments alike.

Her own experience, if nothing else, made her a champion of the rights of women. 'One of the most curious blunders regarding orthodox Christianity is, that it has tended to the elevation of woman. . . . The declaration of the man as he places the ring on the woman's finger is as archaic as the rest of this fossil service, and about as true: "With all my worldly goods I thee endow," says the man, when, as a matter of fact,

* *English Republicanism.*

he becomes possessed of all his wife's property and she does not become possessed of his.' * She followed the same line of attack in her pamphlet *Marriage: As it was, as It is, and as It should be* (1879), where she demanded simply that no discrimination be made between the sexes. And she asked, in *The Political Status of Women* (1885), that the same equality should prevail in every walk of life, urging very reasonably that if women were naturally inferior they would in the course of open competition soon find their level. 'I would urge on those who believe in women's *natural* inferiority, why, in the name of common sense, are you so terribly afraid of putting your theory to the proof? Open to women the learned professions; unlock the gates which bar her out from your mental strife; give her no favour, no special advantages; let her race you on even terms. She must fail, if nature be against her; she must be beaten, if nature has incapacitated her for the struggle.' Her first lecture, in 1874, was devoted to the subject of woman suffrage; forty years later, in 1914, she spoke in favour of it once more. In the eighties she worked for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act and for the abolition of Government Regulation of Prostitution.

Her views upon education were liberal in the extreme. Education, she said, 'should teach children *how* to think, but should never tell them *what* to think'. Therefore she opposed all forms of religious education even before she became an Atheist. (On this point, alas! she has recanted; religious education she now deems a necessity.) But her ideas of education, and its responsibilities, extended in other directions beyond the normal thought of the day. Treating of the problem of *Sin and Crime* (1885) and *The Ethics of Punishment* (1880), she questioned the responsibility of the individual criminal, and whether Society might not possibly owe

* *Beauties of the Prayer-Book.*

him certain positive duties. Shortly, she declared that with the exception of mental or moral lunacy—to be dealt with as lunacy—the criminal was a product of faulty education or (what amounted to the same thing) brutal environment. The remedy was not punishment, but improved education and surroundings. It is scarcely necessary to add that she opposed capital punishment.

Her attitude in all these matters was essentially humane. Politics, as such, she ' cared for not at all, for the necessary compromises of political life were intolerable to me ; but wherever they touched on the life of the people they became to me of burning interest. The land question, the incidence of taxation, the cost of Royalty, the obstructive power of the House of Lords—these were the matters to which I put my hand ; I was a Home Ruler, too, of course, and a passionate opponent of all injustice to nations weaker than ourselves, so that I found myself always in opposition to the Government of the day. Against our aggressive and oppressive policy in Ireland, in the Transvaal, in India, in Afghanistan, in Burma, in Egypt, I lifted up my voice in all our great towns, trying to touch the consciences of the people, and to make them feel the immorality of a land-stealing, piratical policy. Against war, against capital punishment, against flogging, demanding national education instead of big guns, public libraries instead of warships —no wonder I was denounced as an agitator, a firebrand, and that all orthodox society turned up at me its most respectable nose.'

6

Here, then, was the main front on which conflict was joined, and the incidental guerilla warfare, which went on perpetually, calls for little attention. But there were two or three pitched battles which do demand a detailed

record. The first of these was the Knowlton Case of 1877, which advertised as nothing else could have done, and established the beginnings of, the modern Birth Control movement. The Knowlton trial was the means, declares J. M. Robertson, 'of making known the possibility and expediency of family limitation to the British population at large. . . . From the next year or two onwards there proceeded that fall in the birth-rate which has in the last few years come under the investigation of the National Birth Rate Commission.'* Mr and Mrs Sidney Webb, too, note in their *Industrial Democracy* that Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant were the first to bring the issue prominently before the general public, and other testimony is not lacking of the attention focused by the case.

Yet the whole matter was one with which both of them were only accidentally connected, and it was undertaken primarily in the interests of free discussion. It happened that Charles Watts, publisher of *The National Reformer* and of Bradlaugh's and Mrs Besant's pamphlets, had taken over with other stock from a previous owner a booklet on the voluntary limitation of the family, *The Fruits of Philosophy*, by an American doctor, Charles Knowlton. For forty years it had been sold in England without protest. But a Bristol bookseller of doubtful reputation thought it, in 1876, worthy of extra-illustration, and proceeded to decorate it according to taste—his taste—with pictures which the police declared obscene; the wholly innocent publisher was involved in the prosecution. It was quite obvious that Watts was not really concerned, and that by pleading guilty he would escape with a nominal penalty; this he wished to do, but Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant persuaded him to stand by his publication as a matter of principle and to prevent the creation of the precedent of a successful

* *Charles Bradlaugh*, by J. M. Robertson.

prosecution. A defence fund was opened, but Watts on proceeding to Bristol decided to plead guilty and throw himself on the mercy of the court, declaring (falsely, it was said) his ignorance of the pamphlet's contents. Bradlaugh, incensed by Watts's 'treachery', instantly severed all connection with him as friend and publisher and, borrowing with Mrs Besant—they drew up a deed of partnership—three or four hundred pounds from personal friends, rented a 'tumble-down tenement' at 28 Stonecutter Street, off Fleet Street, and founded the Freethought Publishing Company. One of their first acts was to print hurriedly a number of copies of *The Fruits of Philosophy* with a special preface claiming 'the right to publish all opinions, so that the public, enabled to see all sides of the question, may have the material for forming a sound judgment'. They sent notice to the police of their intention, and themselves on March 26th sold copies to detectives. They were arrested on April 6th, released without bail, and on April 19th committed for trial. The trial commenced on June 18th in the Court of Queen's Bench before the Chief Justice of England and a special jury, Sir Hardinge Giffard, the Solicitor-General, leading the prosecution.

It was obvious that both the defendants faced dangers altogether disproportionate to the worth of any individual pamphlet, but they felt that they were fighting for a principle, and neither shrank from danger. Had the prosecution succeeded, one can scarcely doubt that both their careers would have been diverted if not cut short. As it was, for years they were attacked as 'living by the circulation of filthy books' and as 'writers of obscene books'.

The influences to make Mrs Besant withdraw from the case were particularly strong. She was begged for the sake of her good name, for the sake of her daughter, but though, even after the beginning of the prosecution,

she was given an opportunity to withdraw, she would not do so. She felt it a point of honour to stand beside Bradlaugh—rather, it is said, to his embarrassment. In the first place, he was blamed for allowing her to be associated with him in such a case, and again, the responsibility of the defence lay upon him; he had to conduct it for them both, for she knew nothing of legal procedure. He was proud of her determination to share his defeat or victory, but it added to his anxieties. They risked imprisonment, and who then would carry on *The National Reformer* and the newly established business? As it was these had to be left temporarily in the care of Bradlaugh's two daughters.

Thus she came into the case almost upon sufferance, but she very largely prepared its extra-legal side, hunting through countless standard medical works to find 'statements of physiological fact exactly similar to—or even stronger than—those found in the prosecuted pamphlet'. Without these labours, Bradlaugh said, the defence as carried out would have been impossible. During the case her part was, as far as the public could see, as conspicuous as his. Her opening speech for the defence contained fully forty thousand words, Bradlaugh's scarcely half that number. It may not be one of her best speeches, but it is one of her most conscientious, well planned and proportioned, clearly phrased and moving swiftly forward from point to point, from authority to authority, replying to the stressed points of the prosecution, an admirable exposition of the now familiar case for permitting birth control knowledge. It reviews, too, the current sexual attitudes and realities, the evils of celibacy, prostitution, over-population, and the virtues of early marriages and small families. She was, of course, making the most of her opportunity. From beginning to end she kept strictly within the limits of prevailing ideas, defending the Knowlton pamphlet

as protecting current moralities. When the prosecution referred to it (' a dirty, filthy book ') as providing ' the means by which the unmarried female may gratify her passions ' without resultant conception, no one asked why an individual act without social consequence should be socially objectionable. Broadly speaking, it may be said that Mrs Besant put the case, moral and economic, for birth control as a practical measure, and therefore for its discussion, while Bradlaugh was concerned mainly with the defence of the particular publication. During the case the defendants wished to suppœna Charles Darwin and quote passages from his works ; but he wrote asking to be excused on account of ill-health, and added the interesting information ' that he disagreed with preventive checks to population on the ground that over-multiplication was useful, since it caused a struggle for existence in which the strongest and the ablest survived '.* The Lord Chief Justice in summing-up said : ' Gentlemen of the jury : there is one point on which I think every one who has attended to this trial will cordially concur with the Solicitor-General, who has just addressed you—that is as to the mischievous character and effect of this prosecution. A more ill-advised and more injudicious proceeding in the way of prosecution was probably never brought into a court of justice.' The jury in their verdict acquitted the defendants of any corrupt motive, but found them guilty of publishing a book calculated to deprave public morals. An appeal was lodged, and in February 1878 the verdict was quashed by a higher Court of Appeal, not for any reason even remotely touching the merits of the case, but on a totally irrelevant legal point.

The final gain was wholly the defendants'. The pamphlet, and—what was really important—the subject, had had a terrific advertisement ; the former circulated

* *Autobiographical Sketches.*

in hundreds of thousands and was reprinted all over the world (185,000 copies by the Freethought Publishing Company alone in three years). The 'Population Question' was discussed everywhere: 'The accounts of the trial which have appeared in the daily and weekly papers have brought to the knowledge of thousands a great social question of whose existence they had no idea before this prosecution took place. Once more a cause has triumphed by the fall of its defenders. Once more a new truth has been spread everywhere by its persecutors, and has gained a hearing from the dock that it could never have won from the platform.'* The whole case was fully reported in special numbers of *The National Reformer*, and these sold tremendously. Crowded meetings were held in London and in the provinces at which the subject was explained and debated, and in July 1877 was established the Malthusian League.† When at a later date further proceedings were threatened against the defendants, the Government refused to permit them. A prosecution against a bookseller for selling *The Fruits of Philosophy* was instituted by a Vice Society, but the case was dismissed, and seized copies of the pamphlet returned. In December 1877 Mrs Besant published, as an improvement upon Knowlton, her book *The Law of Population: Its Consequences, and its Bearing upon Human Conduct and Morals*. This contains a workmanlike summary of Malthus's Law, and argues the morality and the necessity of some form of artificial check upon increase of population; it portrays the evils of overcrowding, the effect upon conduct and morals, shows that Malthus's

* *In the High Court of Justice*, Preface.

† This, 'the oldest birth control society in the world', celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in July 1927 by a dinner at which the speakers included H. G. Wells, J. M. Keynes, and 'Mrs Annie Besant, who was the first Secretary of the Society'.

remedy—late marriage—leads to ill-health (or prostitution), and fails in practice anyway. It goes on to outline, somewhat sketchily, various methods of contraception. Finally it considers and dismisses some of the familiar objections—mainly ethical—to their use. This pamphlet was certainly more up to date than Knowlton's and shared an almost equal popularity. In ten years 110,000 copies were sold in England, and very many more in America ; it was translated into a great number of languages. Only once was it threatened with prosecution—in Australia—and then unsuccessfully. In April 1891 it was withdrawn from circulation by Mrs Besant herself.

She was now as never before firmly established as a public figure, but unfortunately her notoriety had, while the decision in the Knowlton case was still pending, the disastrous consequence which Bradlaugh and other friends had foretold. Frank Besant already in August 1875 had made one unsuccessful attempt to hide Mabel from her mother during her annual visit in Sibsey. Now, in April 1878, aided by funds subscribed by the Bishop of Lincoln and many clergy and churchmen of the diocese, he applied to the High Court of Chancery for the custody of his daughter. The case, heard on May 10th before Sir George Jessel, Master of the Rolls, deserves attention as indicating the public attitude to Mrs Besant at this time, and, incidentally, her position.

The petition alleged that Mrs Besant was an Atheist and anti-Christian, and an associate of 'an infidel lecturer and author named Charles Bradlaugh' ; that she had, with Bradlaugh, published an indecent and obscene pamphlet ; that during the legal proceedings she stated or inferred (Mrs Besant denied this) 'that in her belief it would be right to teach young children the physiological facts contained in the said pamphlet' ;

that Mabel when sent to a private school in September 1877 was not allowed to receive religious instruction, and was neither taught prayers nor taken to church by her mother *—who was, in short, a person totally unfitted to have charge of an immortal soul in the making. It was also stated in court that one good reason for removing Mabel was that with her mother she was liable to come into contact with Charles Bradlaugh.

On the day of the hearing Mr and Mrs Moncure Conway accompanied Mrs Besant to the court. She conducted her case herself, a fact which distinctly irritated Sir George Jessel, who though ready enough to support women's rights in lesser spheres no doubt resented this affront to legal custom. 'She spoke with quietness, point, and consideration, and with such adherence to the points of law, that although the judge had expressed his annoyance at her for not having counsel, her conduct of the case elicited from him a compliment. She pleaded that so far as her Atheism was concerned the recent Public School Act allowed parents to withdraw their children from all religious education; that it was unprecedented in any court to deprive a parent of a child because of any speculative opinions. She also argued that, as her separation from her husband was on account of her heresy, he had parted with the child knowing that it would not be educated in orthodoxy, and consequently could not come into court on that ground.' † The judge did not agree; he thought that the fact of her refusing to give religious instruction warranted the child being taken away. Secular education he stigmatized as 'not only reprehensible, but detestable, and likely to work utter ruin to the child,

* Mrs Besant, in return, declared that Mabel was occasionally taken to church, and allowed to please herself as to prayers.

† *Autobiography*, by M. D. Conway.

and I certainly should upon this ground alone decide that this child ought not to remain another day under the care of her mother.' Mrs Besant argued that it would not be to Mabel's temporal advantage to take her away from plenty and comfort to her father's 'comparative poverty' (£400 a year!); that Frank Besant was 'so reckless of her health that he chose the moment of her serious illness to ask for her removal'; that she would be taken away from the society of 'cultured and thoughtful' people to that of 'half-educated farmers'; and, finally, that 'in her new home she can have no gentlewomanly attendance. No Christian lady of high character will risk the misconstruction to which she would be exposed alone at Sibsey Vicarage with a young clergyman who is neither a bachelor nor a widower.' * She even offered, if Mabel must be removed, to devote £110 a year to her maintenance and education, should she be placed in any other hands than Frank Besant's. But the judge was obdurate; he 'said that Mrs Besant had acquired such a reputation by her propaganda of sentiments shocking to the community that he was convinced that the worldly interests of the child would be more secure in the house of an English clergyman. It was not, he said, to be expected that respectable ladies would associate with her.' As these words were spoken Mrs Besant 'sat with burning face'. It was the verdict of organized society, but the verdict of the people did not necessarily coincide with it, and as she passed out of court a crowd numbering several hundreds broke into cheers. She scarcely heard them; she had, adds Conway, 'entered the court-room young and beautiful; she came out old and hard. She said to me as she moved out of the court-room: "It's a pity there isn't a God;

* *Autobiographical Sketches.* She was mistaken here; a little later a Miss Robinson 'took up her abode' at Sibsey Vicarage, as Mabel's governess.

it would do one so much good to hate Him." ' It was, possibly, the bitterest moment of her life.*

Mabel was quickly taken away—Jessel refusing to stay the order even until the hearing of an appeal—and in the *Autobiography* we have a moving picture of the messenger coming to the house, and the child being ' carried away by main force, shrieking and struggling, still weak from the fever, and nearly frantic with fear and passionate resistance '. Elsewhere, from another source, we have an equally moving picture of Bradlaugh hearing Jessel's decision while Mrs Besant was away from home, and sending his daughter Hypatia to take Mabel to Willesden Junction Station to hand her into Mrs Besant's keeping as she passed through on her way to fulfil a lecture engagement at Manchester. So they contrived to have a last few peaceful hours together! Here is a direct contradiction; which of the two statements is true does not much matter, but it does matter perhaps that even in so simple and straightforward an incident the truth should be so evasive.

Again Mrs Besant's health gave way; she succumbed in July to rheumatic fever, a serious illness through which Bradlaugh and his daughters devotedly nursed her. In September Alice and Hypatia took her to North Wales for a holiday. Meanwhile Mr Besant took advantage of her illness to apply for an injunction forbidding her to bring any suit against him. Also, but without applying to the court, he stopped her allowance. Next he refused to let her see the children. She

* Conway, by the way, notes that at no time did Mrs Besant speak to him with any bitterness of her husband. Sir Walter Besant, whom Conway met frequently, never at any time alluded to Frank Besant in his hearing. A sentence from Archibald Henderson's biography of Bernard Shaw is interesting: ' The fact that Mrs Besant's children were taken from her like Shelley's, aroused hot indignation, as did the prosecutions for " blasphemy " then going on. It is not without significance that, even at that time, Shaw was Socialist enough to defend the action of the State in both cases,'

appealed to Sir George Jessel, and upon his advice filed a counter-claim for divorce or judicial separation, alleging distinct acts of cruelty. The reply, a general denial, stated that the acts of cruelty, if any, were done in the heat of the moment. Mr Besant pleaded that in any case the deed of separation of 1873 protected him from any further proceedings on her part, whether for divorce or restitution of conjugal rights, and this plea was approved by the ordinary and by the Appeal Courts. Finally, however, she was allowed to see the children alone once a month, to have them with their governess for a week in her own home twice a year and for a week at the seaside, to receive a weekly letter from each and to reply. It proved useless ; Mabel was too much upset by the monthly visit and separation, while ' on the first visit to the seaside, I was saddled with the cost of maintaining the Rev Mr and Mrs Child, who were placed as guardians over the children, and who treated me in their presence as though I were a dangerous animal from whom they were to be protected '. For instance, ' I was told that Mabel could not be allowed to bathe with me, and this with a suggestiveness that sorely taxed my self-control '. She felt these petty forms of insult must estrange the children, so after a vain appeal answered by ' a mocking suggestion that I should complain to the Master of the Rolls ', ' I resolved neither to see nor to write to my children until they were old enough to understand and to judge for themselves '.* She would, she was sure, win them back to her in time. Her confidence was justified : they returned to her, she says, the moment they were old enough to free themselves.

Twice, in the interval, dissatisfied with the teaching Mabel was receiving, she offered to pay the whole expense of her daughter's education at Cheltenham High School or in a London college, without appearing in

* *Autobiographical Sketches.*

the matter, but each time her suggestion was rejected, not too courteously. The Rev Frank Besant appears throughout all this period as strangely vindictive, driving home each possible advantage at every point. No doubt he thought himself peculiarly afflicted, with a pain renewed at her every fresh outburst ; a case might be made out for him perhaps, but it is scarcely one to which we could listen patiently to-day.*

Yet Mrs Besant's enemies by attacking her gave her strength. Taking her daughter they had done their worst. She was at last stripped indeed for the conflict.

It was with an added bitterness that made itself very plain in her writings that she returned from convalescence to her labours. But she consoled herself with the thought that ' Freethinkers who attack Christian doctrines are only born a century or so too soon, and may fight on fearlessly, knowing that time is on their side '. There is many a true word spoken in controversy.

That autumn (1878), as also in the previous year, she went with Bradlaugh and his daughters upon a combined holiday and lecturing tour in Scotland. Returning, she attempted once more to forget her loneliness in work. Her lecturing since the beginning of 1877 had been constantly interrupted by illness and litigation ; now she took it up again as busily as before, in addition to her

* In June, 1878, a religious Congress of Liberal Thinkers was arranged by Conway and W. K. Clifford and held at South Place Chapel. To this both Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant were invited, but would not attend owing to their dread of association with any religious group. They were both primarily concerned with religion, yet they were forced by the exigencies of the times to avoid it like the very devil.

A true story concerning Frank Besant is possibly worth repeating here. He visited some time in the nineties, in the capacity of examiner, a Worcestershire Grammar School. Arriving somewhat unexpectedly the night before, he was taken by the head master, a jolly man, to the latter's home, and jestingly introduced to the family as ' the new curate '. His annoyance was obvious, and it remained so throughout the examination ; the report he gave the school probably induced the head master to restrain his humour when entertaining future examiners !

normal labours of producing books and pamphlets, editing *The National Reformer*, acting as secretary to the Malthusian League and, a little later, vice-president of the Land Law Reform League (1881) and the League for the Defence of Constitutional Rights (1884), and carrying on a campaign against the Beaconsfield Government, to which Conservative supporters replied by hiring 'roughs' to disable Bradlaugh and break up his meetings. In November 1878 she wrote her first pamphlet dealing with Indian affairs. This was *The Story of Afghanistan: or, Why the Tory Government gags the Indian Press*. Like all her pamphlets it deals primarily with facts, and tells in detail, with names and dates, the story of England's past treatment of Afghanistan. As she says, it made her name first known in India, and 'laid in many an Indian heart a foundation of affection for me'.

But all this proved insufficient. She found that while reading her thoughts would wander continually back to Mabel, and so, characteristically, she resolved to occupy herself by reading up for some examinations: 'I thought it would serve as an absorbing form of recreation from my other work.' London University had in 1878 thrown open all its examinations and degrees to women, and so in February 1879 she began to study under a lately-found friend, Dr E. B. Aveling—a new contributor to *The National Reformer*—in order to matriculate in the following June. This meant less than six months' preparation, and she could spare little time from her work,* but she passed in the first class. In August Dr Aveling was dismissed from the Chair of Comparative Anatomy for joining the National Secular Society; two classes were thereupon established at the Hall of Science under the South Kensington Science and Art Department, and

* That spring she translated from the French a complete book, *The Religion of Israel; a Study in Comparative Mythology*, by Jules Soury.

more were rapidly added until in 1883 there were well over a dozen, all taught by Aveling and his pupils, and covering, in addition to a number of science courses, classes for Latin and London University Matriculation. Mrs Besant, eager to play her part, obtained in 1880 first-class certificates qualifying her as a lecturer under the Science and Art Department on Inorganic Chemistry, Animal Physiology, General Biology, Botany, Acoustics, Light and Heat, Theoretical Mechanics, Magnetism and Electricity, and Mathematics. She also passed the first B.Sc. and Preliminary Science examinations with Honours in Botany in the London University, though in the final examination she failed three times in practical chemistry, which ' puzzled me not a little at the time, as I had passed a far more difficult practical chemical examination for teachers at South Kensington '. She taught in these classes, which became continuously more successful, until 1888, though against considerable opposition. A certain amount of persecution of Bradlaugh's daughters had been going on at the City of London College, where they were students, since 1877 ; in 1881 Sir Henry Tyler, a special enemy of Bradlaugh in the House of Commons, tried to prevent the Hall of Science classes receiving Government grants—' the argument was that science classes taught by Atheists should be excluded from the South Kensington system '. On one occasion Mrs Besant was refused admission to the garden of the Royal Botanic Society because the daughters of the curator also used it, and in May 1883 she and the Bradlaugh girls (comrades in perpetual misfortune) were similarly excluded from the University College practical botany class on the ground of some prejudice against them. The Council endorsed this action. A meeting was called by Huxley and other liberal spirits to discuss the matter, but the medical graduates (the hooligan mentality normal to medical

students awakening once more within them) turned up in large numbers to shout and vote for the Council. Students at the College who ventured to prepare and circulate a petition on Mrs Besant's behalf were attacked and their papers torn to pieces amid general rejoicing.

All this while the ordinary Secularist and Radical routine work went on as usual. But the great struggle of the early eighties—the third pitched battle of the period—was that between Bradlaugh and the House of Commons. Into this Mrs Besant entered actively but only in a subordinate role.

At the General Election of April 1880 Bradlaugh and Henry Labouchere, the famous proprietor of *Truth*, secured as co-candidates at Northampton a great Liberal victory, supplanting two Conservatives. Arose a cry of horror from certain sections of the community, followed by one of delight when Bradlaugh conscientiously delivered himself into the hands of his enemies, claiming his optional right to affirm rather than take the oath in the House. His right was refused, and when he presented himself at the table of the House to take the oath in the ordinary way (having explained that he would regard himself as ' bound, not by the letter of its words, but by the spirit which the affirmation would have conveyed, had I been permitted to use it ') that also was refused. Select Committees were appointed, the House voted on the matter, delivered orders—which, steadfastly constitutional, he refused to obey because he held them to be against the law—lodged him in the Clock Tower as a prisoner, and at last on July 2nd allowed him to affirm.

His opponents at once carried the matter to the courts and in the spring of 1881 his seat was declared vacant. Northampton, after the bitterest election he ever fought, defiantly sent him back to the House, which expelled him again on August 3rd, 1881, after a memorable scene.

Mrs Besant had followed him to the House of Commons that day at the head of a large crowd of working men gathered from all parts of the country and bearing a monster petition. For a long while nothing was heard from within by the waiting crowd; it began to grow restless, to cry aloud 'Petition, petition, justice, justice', and at last a charge was made up the steps leading to the lobby. But Mrs Besant sprang forward and begged them, for Bradlaugh's sake, to be quiet and orderly. Had she held back, or had Bradlaugh himself but called upon them when a few moments later he was thrust by sheer weight of numbers into the Palace Yard, then that night, says one obviously regretful historian, might 'the multitude have taken its own way, sacked the House, and thrown, if not the Speaker and his wig, at least Lord Randolph Churchill, and Sir Stafford Northcote, and Sir Henry Woolf, comrades three, into the Thames, that ancient river and unclean'.* It was fortunate for the traditions of the House that both Bradlaugh and Mrs Besant were stern constitutionalists.

Again the seat was declared vacant, again he was elected—and again refused. But Liberal opinion was coming to his support, and after a fourth election he was permitted to take his seat and the oath. By 1885 his victory was complete; when at the General Election he was returned for the fifth time, the Speaker 'peremptorily and absolutely refused to allow any member, leading or other, to interfere between another member and the Oath, declaring that he, as Speaker, had no right to allow such an interference'. Three years later Bradlaugh brought in and successfully carried his own Affirmation Bill, giving members the right to affirm and bestowing other privileges upon Freethinkers.

It was a decisive victory. His acceptance by the House of Commons was a symbol of his acceptance by

* J. M. Robertson in *Charles Bradlaugh*, by Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner.

society as a whole. In the early eighties it was argued that, as he was an Atheist, it would be an insult to God to admit him to Parliament. Nine years later, during a serious illness (he never recovered completely from the effects of his forcible ejection from the House), prayers were offered in many churches for his recovery. The fact was, as Shaw acidly remarks, that 'it became apparent that he was a conservative force in politics'—as indeed is shown by his opposition to Socialism—and so 'he, without any recantation of his Atheism, at once had a string of evil qualities exchanged for a rosary of good ones'.* Thus too, when after his death in 1891 the 'obituary notices appeared, with the usual string of qualities—eloquence, determination, integrity, strong common sense, and so on', they were precisely like those of any national hero—Gladstone, Morley, or W. T. Stead. This is the common fate of iconoclasts; it seems clear enough that it will be Mrs Besant's.

7

But Bradlaugh's victory carried with it other consequences, or at any rate he thought so. Writing in 1891 he regretted that his Parliamentary work had divided his and Mrs Besant's paths. So it may have seemed, but in fact it was something deeper, a fundamental difference, which brought the divergence. Their friendship continued, though not without strain, to the day of his death; their active co-operation lasted, as his daughter states, until her changing opinions and activities carried her away 'into close association with persons strongly inimical to Mr Bradlaugh and the aims to which he was devoting his life'. His disappointment was bitter, though to the end he would never permit any attack

* *Quintessence of Ibsenism.*

upon her in his presence. 'For thirteen years she had stood upon the same platform with him; and when she one day said that for ten years she had been dissatisfied with her own teaching, he felt it very keenly.'

It was Socialism that first divided them. Bradlaugh was a convinced individualist; he believed in equal opportunity—and devil take the hindmost; he agreed with Darwin that it was for the benefit of the race as a whole that the weakest should go to the wall. Thus Socialism, which he never understood, he naturally opposed. Because he was the foremost platform speaker in the country, because too of his reputation as a Radical leader, he was from a practical point of view the most formidable of all Socialism's many opponents at that time, and the Socialists sought to controvert him on every possible occasion. At last, in the spring of 1884, they arranged a debate between him and H. M. Hyndman on the subject: *Will Socialism Benefit the English People?* to take place on April 17th at the St James's Hall. Hyndman has confessed that he went to the hall that cold, unpleasant evening in fear and trembling, to face his great opponent before a huge audience. 'But I had one idea in my head and that was, whatever might come of the debate thereafter, to get in, during my first half-hour, a statement of the meaning and objects of Socialism which people would easily read. It was worth even being beaten in immediate argument, if I was to be beaten, to ensure that.' * Bradlaugh responded 'tellingly', but Hyndman stood gallantly to his guns. At the end Individualism, it seemed, had carried the day; Bradlaugh's followers, who made most of the audience, loudly expressed their triumph as they left the hall. But Bernard Shaw is said to have retorted, with characteristic insight, to one of them: 'Our man has been playing at longer bowls than you know.'

* *Record of an Adventurous Life.*

It was true. Within a very short time not only Mrs Besant but Aveling and others of Bradlaugh's ablest supporters had joined one or another of the Socialist groups. There was another reason, Mrs Besant suggests, for her separation from Bradlaugh. She saw that he had won through to acceptance, and that it was *her* friendship that carried odium now.

In truth, it may be suggested, each had served the turn of the other. She had given him an aid, a companionship, an intellectual and womanly sympathy such as none other could give ; he, on the other hand, had given her experience—she was ready now to stand alone. Whatever the cause the divergence is certain. More than once, as in connection with the Law and Liberty League promoted by her and Stead, he was compelled to oppose her. And, says Bradlaugh's daughter, ' nothing will show how far these two had drifted asunder more than that Mr Bradlaugh should first learn of Mrs Besant's adhesion to the Theosophical Society through an article written by her in a weekly paper, and not from her own lips '. From that time he lost all confidence in her—the partnership in the Freethought Publishing Company was dissolved, and the shop in Fleet Street closed, in December 1890.

One scarcely knows whether to regret more that Bradlaugh could not follow Mrs Besant into Socialism, or to rejoice that she was able to set herself free to move onward to a truer and more constructive political solution. ' The combination of Bradlaugh and Annie Besant,' Bernard Shaw has written, ' was so extraordinary that its dissolution was felt as a calamity, as if some one had blown up Niagara or an earthquake had swallowed a cathedral. Socialism had many colleagues to offer her who were more accomplished than Bradlaugh. One of them, William Morris, was a far greater man. But there was no platform warrior so mighty : no man

who could dominate an audience with such an air of dominating his own destiny. Unhappily for him, she was right and he was wrong on the point that divided them ; and when they parted, his sun set in a rosy glow of parliamentary acceptance, even by Lord George Hamilton, whilst hers was still stormily rising.' *

* *Dr Annie Besant : Fifty Years in Public Work.*

On the world-stage it is heroism, and only heroism, which acts the principal parts. It is in heroism—we feel clearly—that the mystery of life lies hidden.

Albert Houtin

IV

THE STORMY EIGHTIES

I

POLITICS in the seventies, though its champions would have resented the suggestion, was very much of a sham fight, in so far that the economic interests of the commercialized middle class were already merged with those of the aristocratic landowners—also more and more commercialized—and their real opponents, the workers, had not yet found articulate and effective voice. That came for the first time, and then but feebly in the eighties, with the revival of Socialism on one hand and the growth of Trade Unionism on the other—followed by the interpenetration of the second by the first. The eighties saw only the beginning, but because it was a beginning the period remains significant for us to-day as the preceding decade does not; the Socialism of the eighties belongs to the present in a sense in which the Radicalism of the seventies belongs to the past, despite the fact that in a great degree one prepared the way for the other. Bradlaugh's Radicalism was essentially Liberalism, and when in his last years the Liberals in the House of Commons took him to their bosoms he found his true home. He represented the logical conclusion of an old tradition, whereas the Fabian Society and the Social Democratic Federation declared the birth of a new. Bradlaugh could not understand Socialism—his attacks were made upon a crude, rigid system of absolute State Control which existed only in his own mind. Perhaps the truth was, as Shaw has suggested, that he was still looking back to the abortive efforts of Robert Owen, which had been forgotten during the period of

prosperity following the repeal of the Corn Laws but were recalled again as conditions gradually grew worse ; he certainly wholly overlooked the newer economic solutions of Marx and Henry George, to which the younger Radicals were turning with interest and hope.

Mrs Besant's attention was drawn to Socialism early in 1883, apparently by a lecture delivered by Louise Michelle ; her inclusion in the May issue of *Our Corner* of an article defending Socialism may have been a consequence. *Our Corner* was a sixpenny monthly owned and edited by Mrs Besant, and it appeared from January 1883 until December 1888. It existed in the first place to advocate Freethought and Radical ideas, but it became as time went on more and more a vehicle for Socialist propaganda. Its political notes were done throughout by Bradlaugh, but its chief claim to fame is that it published as serials Bernard Shaw's two earliest printed novels, *The Irrational Knot* and *Love Among the Artists*, together with some of his Socialist essays and art criticism. The last number, indeed, consisted wholly of the concluding chapters of *Love Among the Artists* and a final instalment of his *The Economic Aspect of Socialism*, with a few pages of miscellaneous reviews.

Of Socialist economics Mrs Besant confesses she knew nothing at first, and though her interest was roused by a brief discussion in *The National Reformer* in 1883, it was not until after the Bradlaugh-Hyndman debate that she gave the subject serious study. Up to that time she had been antagonized by the prejudiced and bitter attacks made upon Bradlaugh by some of the Socialist leaders, and by the reckless phrases, appearing to advocate bloodthirsty revolution, to which one or two of them—and Hyndman in particular—were given. But in the debate Hyndman restrained himself ; he played at long bowls and he scored. Socialism was becoming more and more a matter of public controversy, and

throughout 1884 she ' listened, read and thought much, but said little ', until she reached the conclusion ' that the case for Socialism was intellectually complete and ethically beautiful '. In January 1885 she was accused by a correspondent to *The National Reformer* of Socialist tendencies in advocating rate-subsidized meals for Board School children. This correspondent was W. P. Ball, who a little later (1886) courteously described her as having ' a mind like a milk-jug ; that which is poured into it is in turn poured out of it ', and of being ' like most women, at the mercy of her last male acquaintance for her views on economics '. This last accusation she indignantly rejected, declaring that she did not ' make the acquaintance of one of my present Socialist comrades, male or female, until I had embraced Socialism '. This seems to have been true, though she had—in 1884—come into contact with them in the course of her work.

Thus she met on the platform at South Place Institute George Bernard Shaw—an eccentric young man in his late twenties, garbed in a severely cut and monstrously ugly rational suit of woven wool, his chin adorned with a fringe of fiery beard, on his upper lip a bristling moustache, on his lower a single vivid tuft. She disliked him extremely ; he was at this time a struggling author, but he had already developed his ' passion for representing himself as a scoundrel ', and upon this occasion he cheerfully referred to himself as a loafer. Seizing upon this phrase Mrs Besant vented her dislike angrily in print, then found that she owed him an apology. It was a misunderstanding he undoubtedly enjoyed more than she ; she confesses that she ' privately felt somewhat injured at having been entrapped into such a blunder '. Later they became very good friends, though she found him always the ' most provoking of men ; a man with a perfect genius for " aggravating " the enthusiastically earnest '—of whom she was certainly

one. His impression of her at this time is interesting. She was, he says, 'an incorrigible benefactress, and probably revenged herself for my freely expressed scorn for this weakness by drawing on her private account to pay me for my jejune novels'. * 'The chief fault of her extraordinary qualities was that she was fiercely proud. I tried, by means of elaborate little comedies, to disgust her with beneficence and to make her laugh at her pride; but the treatment was not, as far as I know, very successful. . . . Though I succeeded sometimes in making her laugh at me, I never succeeded in making her laugh at herself or check her inveterate largesse. I ought to have done much more for her, and she much less for me, than we did. . . . I do not like the proverb "Love me little: love me long", but whoever invented it had a very narrow escape of finding its true form, which is, "Love me lightly: love me long". And that is how I loved, and still love, Annie Besant.' † It is not the least of tributes to her personal character that she has been able, at every stage of her life, to attract and hold the loves and loyalties of such men as Bernard Shaw, who, even when her ideas took a path they could not follow, still did not waver in their affections.

She hesitated for some time before allying herself publicly 'with the advocates of Socialism, because of the attitude of bitter hostility they had adopted towards Mr Bradlaugh. . . . Could I take public action which might bring me into collision with the dearest of my friends, which might strain the strong and tender tie so long existing between us?' There could be, of course, only one answer: 'With a heavy heart I made up my mind to profess Socialism openly and work for it with all my energy.' She compromised merely to the extent of joining the Fabian Society because it was less antagon-

* *G. B. Shaw: Life and Works*, by Archibald Henderson.
† *Dr Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work.*

'THE STORMY EIGHTIES'

istic to Bradlaugh and the Radicals generally than either the Social Democratic Federation or the Socialist League and advocated wholly peaceful and constitutional methods. She hid her intention up to the last moment, and the change was a surprise to all. One day—it must have been in May or June 1885—Shaw addressed a meeting of the Dialectical Society on the subject of Socialism. There he 'found the members perturbed and excited by the appearance of Annie Besant, who had long ceased to attend the Dialectical meetings, and was still counted as the most redoubtable champion of the old individualist Freethought of which Bradlaugh was the exponent. I was warned on all hands that she had come down to destroy me, and that from the moment she rose to speak my cause was lost. I resigned myself to my fate and pleaded my case as best I could. When the discussion began every one waited for Annie Besant to lead the opposition. She did not rise; and at last the opposition was undertaken by another member. When he had finished, Annie Besant, to the amazement of the meeting, got up and utterly demolished him. There was nothing left for me to do but to gasp and triumph under her shield. At the end she asked me to nominate her for election to the Fabian Society and invited me to dine with her.' *

Very quickly she became one of the Society's most prominent members. At first, Shaw suggests, she was somewhat out of place. For one thing, 'comedy was not her clue to life; she had a healthy sense of fun; but no truth came to her first as a joke. . . . Now the Fabian vein was largely the vein of comedy, and its conscience a sense of irony. We laughed at Socialism and laughed at ourselves a good deal.'

The work of the Society was already within its limits being very efficiently carried on, but it lacked effective open-air speakers. There was Shaw, there was Graham

* *Dr Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work.*

Wallas—and now Mrs Besant. Of the three she was at this time by far the finest—by general consent the greatest orator in England, possibly in the world—and of the three she had had by far the most extensive experience of public agitation; of all the Fabians she alone had 'an assured position amongst the working-class Radicals in London and throughout the country, and through her Socialism obtained a sympathetic hearing in places where less trusted speakers would have been neglected'.* Thus, though she became a member of the Executive Council, she was never primarily concerned with the 'indoor work', with guiding its policy, as were, say, Shaw and Webb. Instead, she 'became a sort of expeditionary force, always to the front when there was trouble and danger, carrying away audiences for us when the dissensions in the movement brought our policy into conflict with that of the other societies, founding branches for us throughout the country, dashing into the great strikes and free speech agitations of that time . . . forming on her own initiative such *ad hoc* organizations as were necessary to make them effective, and generally leaving the routine to us and taking the fighting on herself'.†

Her purpose was not the study and development of Socialist thought but its popularization. It is fairly safe to say that she made no permanent contribution to Socialist *ideas*; her pamphlets, as always, were simply competent, admirable summaries of the views of others; lacking individuality as they do, they have not survived even to the present. Yet that working-class opinion to-day is so largely and so increasingly Socialistic must be attributed in part at least to the untiring propaganda of Annie Besant in the later eighties.

* *History of the Fabian Society*, by E. R. Pease. Mr Pease also notes that at this time 'few outside the working-classes regarded her with respect'.

† *Dr Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work.*

Mrs Besant was, not unnaturally, much concerned with lessening the breach between Socialism and Radicalism. The Radical she regarded as a half-fledged Socialist. 'The position that I desire to advance is that Socialism is the outcome, the legitimate and necessary outcome, of Radicalism; that the main current of Radical legislation, despite little eddies and backwaters, sets towards Socialism; and that just as Evolution, taking up the chaos of biological facts, set them forth as an intelligible and co-related order, so Socialism, dealing with the chaos of sociological facts, brings a unified principle, which turns Radicalism from a mere empirical system into a reasoned, coherent, and scientific whole. . . . Radical legislation in removing privilege, in placing public affairs in the hands of the populace, in assailing landlord monopoly, in regulating the relations between employer and employed, is penetrated by the Socialist spirit and has already leavened the community with Socialist ideas.' *

The Socialist owed much to the Radical; from the Radical she asked a sane appreciation of Socialism. 'Let me point out that my friend Mr Bradlaugh is attacking a very crude presentment of Socialism when he defines it as "the theory and the scheme which denies all individual property, which denounces individual effort or individual gain, and affirms that society organized as the State should own all wealth, protect all labour, and compel the equal distribution of all produce".' On one hand she was careful to insist that her Socialism was 'no wild scheme, no Utopia impossible of realization' because dependent upon inhuman altruism; it was, on the other hand, 'a carefully reasoned scheme of production, distribution, and administration, which it is contended is better than the monopoly system of today'—a scheme which could, simply by means of legis-

* This and the following passages are from *Radicalism and Socialism.*

lation, be put into operation almost at once.* For her, she made it clear, Socialism was no ' iron system '. The ' tyranny of Socialism ' would ' consist only in ordering —and enforcing the order if necessary—that every healthy adult should labour for his own subsistence. That is, it would protect the liberty of each by not allowing anyone to compel another person to work for him, and by opening to all equal opportunities of working for themselves.'

She was, she said, a Socialist mainly for three reasons. First, because she believed in evolution, and ' the progress of society has been from individualistic anarchy to associated order '. Second, ' because of the failure of our present civilization. . . . Is it necessary that, while civilization brings to some art, beauty, refinement—all that makes life fair and gracious—it should bring to others drudgery, misery, degradation, such as no uncivilized people know ? ' Third, ' because the poverty of the workers is, and must continue to be, an integral part of the present method of wealth-production and wealth-distribution. . . . And because no system save that of Socialism claims that there shall be no individual monopoly of that on which the whole nation must depend, of the soil on which it is born and must subsist, of the capital accumulated by the labour of its innumerable children, living and dead ; because no system save that of Socialism claims for the whole community control of its land and its capital ; because no system save that of Socialism declares that wealth created by associated workers should be shared among those workers, and that no idlers should have a lien upon it ; because no system save that of Socialism makes industry really free

* Her contribution to *Fabian Essays*, depicting the rapid socialization of industry by municipalization, may be taken as an instance. Time, says Pease, has dealt hardly with her essay, for its prophecies have not been fulfilled. Possibly, but the fault is rather with time than with her plan, which still remains practical enough.

and the worker really independent, by substituting co-operation among workers for employed and employing classes ; because of all this I am a Socialist.' *

Her Socialism, she said, was based on economic facts ; with equal truth she might have declared it based also on moral issues. Again and again in her Socialist essays she stressed the ideal of the fully developed man, and attacked Industrialism for its tendency to produce fixed castes of workers. It was Industrialism which destroyed individuality, not Socialism, which ' will cultivate and accentuate it, and indeed will make it possible for the first time in civilization for the vast majority. For it needs, in order that individuality shall be developed, that the individual shall have his characteristics drawn out and trained by education ; it needs that he shall work, in maturity, at the work for which his natural abilities fit him ; it needs that he shall not be exhausted by excessive toil, but shall go fresh and vigorous to his labour ; it needs that he shall have leisure to continuously improve himself, to train his intellect and his taste. But such education, such choice of work, such short hours of labour, such leisure for self-culture, where are all these to-day for our labouring population ? ' † ' The essence of Socialism,' she would have agreed with Leonard Woolf, ' is that it seeks to obtain the maximum equality in the distribution of material things among the community in order to obtain the maximum variation in spiritual gifts and mental power.'‡

* *Why I am a Socialist.* † *Modern Socialism.*

‡ *What Is Socialism ? A Symposium.* Mrs Besant is still a Socialist ; she still ' believes that the next great stage of civilization will be Socialistic '. In 1889, following her conversion to Theosophy, she issued a pamphlet, *Karma and Social Improvement*, in which she declared herself ' at once a Socialist and a Theosophist '. The two, she said, were compatible.

Nevertheless she ceased to be in any sense a Socialist propagandist after 1890. Socialism, as generally preached, she seems to have concluded, was

2

The period 1884–1886 marked to a certain extent a turning from politics to practical social issues, to a study of the actual conditions under which the working classes of the country lived. These were not unknown to her, but she had never before faced them so deliberately ; she was striving to recognize the realities of our social system. She visited the slums, and wrote in her papers of what she found there. 'The cry of starving children was ever in my ears ; the sobs of women poisoned in lead works, exhausted in nail works, driven to prostitution by starvation, made old and haggard by ceaseless work. I saw their misery was the result of an evil system, was inseparable from private ownership of the instruments of wealth production ; that while the worker was himself but an instrument, selling his labour under the law of supply and demand, he must remain helpless in the grip of the employing class, and that trade combinations could only mean increased warfare—necessary, indeed, for the time as weapons of defence—but meaning war, not brotherly co-operation for all for the good of all.' She tried to enter into every aspect of their lives, even to

not wide enough, and her continued quest was for a wider basis. 'Important as economics may be and are, behind economics lie men and women, and unless men and women are trained into a noble humanity, economic schemes will fail as hopelessly as any political schemes can possibly do. . . . It is this point which, more than anything else, led me outside the paths of Socialist propaganda into trying to form the material which the Socialist needs for the building of the State.' It led her too from the conception of a Democratic to that of an Aristocratic Socialism, the motto of which would be not 'To everyone according to his needs', but 'From everyone according to his capabilities' (*The Future Socialism*, 1908). Democracy, she argues, is right in thinking that government exists for the sake of the people, but it regards numbers rather than wisdom as the source of authority, and mistakenly places power in the hands of the people. She would set at the head of the State to guide its destinies a monarch and council of wise men—a conception which obviously necessitates acceptance of an established hierarchy, Theosophical or otherwise.

share their amusements. In *Our Corner* * she printed an account of *How London Amuses Itself*, the theme of which is the paucity of any intellectual element. She describes visits mainly to music-halls, in the cheaper seats. The predominating impression is one simply of dullness, the fun being rough and poor, if seldom indecent. Of the inferior class of hall she found the South London Palace very typical. 'Very few women were present, and those I saw were, I think, without exception "unfortunates". The men had mostly very rough outsides—I was in the cheapest part, whereto the admission is sixpence—but one or two of whom I asked questions answered me with ready friendliness, and one near the end, thinking I suppose that I looked tired, very kindly gave me his seat. Rough horseplay there was here and there, but no more. For instance, a poor girl who had drunk enough to be quarrelsome, did not rise to the level of her companion's sportiveness, and when he playfully applied to the tip of her right ear the lighted match with which he had kindled his pipe, she responded with a blow on the nose, and an order to "Give over, do". . . . When I arrived a girl was on the stage, who sang more musically than any other I had heard, Miss Marie Lloyd. She was bright and arch without vulgarity, and led the audience merrily in the choruses in which they heartily joined.' She seemed to identify herself almost aggressively with these people, wearing heavy boots, short skirts, and a red neckerchief and tam-o'-shanter. She cut her hair short, as she has kept it ever since.

It was towards the end of 1886 and during 1887 that she returned again to an interest in political action and put forward definite plans for transferring Socialist ideals to the political sphere. On September 17th 1886 she read a paper to the Fabian Society on *Socialism and Political Action*, and proposed the resolution: 'That it

* July and August 1886.

is advisable that Socialists should organize themselves as a political party, for the purpose of transferring into the hands of the whole working community full control over the soil and means of production, as well as over the production and distribution of wealth.' In the following February, largely at her instigation, the Fabian Parliamentary League was formed ; she set up a few branches in the provinces, but the venture was short-lived and they soon perished. One form of practical amusement adopted by a number of Fabians at this time was the Charing Cross Parliament, in which, about August 1887, the Socialist Party defeated the Liberals and ' took the reins of office '. H. H. Champion became Prime Minister ; Mrs Besant (Member for Northampton) Home Secretary ; Shaw was President of the Local Government Board, Sidney Webb Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hubert Bland Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Graham Wallas President of the Board of Trade, and Stewart Headlam Secretary for Ireland. Other offices were not less worthily filled. Intellectually it was undoubtedly the most brilliant ' government ' this country has ever seen, and one scarcely needs Mrs Besant's assurance that in the Queen's Speech ' her Majesty addressed her loyal Commons with a plainness of speech never before (or since) heard from the throne '.

But a more serious struggle was at hand, in which all such frivolities had to be thrust aside. The year 1886 saw the first perceptible effects of a temporary depression in trade, or rather in the labour market—which is somewhat different ; for though from March onward the Socialist Notes in *Our Corner* remarked reductions in wages everywhere and an increase in the numbers of unemployed, there was no lowering of dividends. The unemployed were not slow to see this, and a smouldering discontent spread as the colder autumn months came round, bringing the menace of winter. Even those who

were employed failed sometimes to realize the benefits God granted them. 'We may as well starve idle as starve working,' one man told Mrs Besant. The mood prevailed widely, and naturally the forces of Law and Order were not slow to mobilize against such anti-social elements. In June there was a General Election, and a strong Conservative Government was returned with Lord Salisbury as Prime Minister. Confident in its strength it began to take measures. An attempt was made to curb the activities of Socialist open-air speakers by a policy of police repression, and that autumn it was found necessary to create in self-defence a fund to provide arrested speakers and workmen with bail and legal advice. Naturally the organizations increased and extended their agitation, the S.D.F. being particularly active. The year ended with deepening distress reported from all parts, and in 1887 conditions grew gradually worse. 'Socialists everywhere were busying themselves on behalf of the unemployed, urging vestries to provide remunerative work for those applying for relief, assailing the Local Government Board with practical proposals for utilizing the productive energies of the unemployed, circulating suggestions to municipalities and other local representative bodies, urging remedial measures.' Meanwhile the Government sat aloft and pretended that what it did not want to see had no existence. In September Mrs Besant wrote in *Our Corner*: 'This one thing is clear. Society must deal with the unemployed, or the unemployed will deal with Society. Stormier and stormier becomes the social outlook.'

That autumn brought a crisis. Faced by the fearful prospect of another winter, and made desperate by the stolid inattention of the Government and public opinion, the London unemployed in October 'became tired of starving silently, and began walking in procession through

the streets, and holding meetings in Trafalgar Square'.* The newspapers, having just then nothing else more interesting than the illness of the Duchess of Teck to worry about, began to fill their columns with highly coloured accounts which caused some alarm among those who saw nothing of the actually peaceful—indeed, hopelessly indifferent—demonstrators. Particularly in the provinces these scare accounts were accepted to such an extent that country visitors were supposed to be holding aloof. Tradesmen complained, and the authorities, instantly attentive, passed the word to the police, who began moving on the crowds which gathered each day in the Square. 'A very pathetic crowd it was, listening with the semi-stolidity of perennial privation to the speakers who addressed it; now and then flickering up into a gleam of hope; floating vaguely hither and thither over the wide flagged area; despondently indifferent, mostly, and vaguely doubtful whether much help lay either in words or acts.' † Next, individuals were arrested for obstruction. Then the crowd, sullenly patient, would move away, walking the streets to Hyde Park. One day—October 18th—they were followed to the Park, and there assaulted by horse and foot police, who used their batons briskly and arrested those who objected to such treatment. Mrs Besant hastily organized 'a band of well-to-do men and women, who promised to obey a telegraphic summons, night or day, and to bail out any prisoner arrested for exercising the ancient right of walking in procession and speaking'. On November 9th Sir Charles Warren, the Chief Commissioner of Police, peremptorily forbade all gatherings in the Square; then, upon appeal, he agreed that genuine political meetings should not be interfered with. In consequence the Metropolitan Radical Federation decided to proceed with its arrangements for a demon-

* *Story of Trafalgar Square.* † *Ibid.*

stration on Sunday November 13th to protest against the Government's Irish policy. Suddenly, on Saturday evening, Warren issued an order forbidding any organized procession to approach or enter the neighbourhood of the Square. This amounted to forbidding the meeting, but at a conference of delegates from the various Radical and Socialist clubs Mrs Besant urged that it must be held if only to assert the liberty of free gathering. 'It was finally decided to go to the Square as arranged, and, if challenged by the police, to protest formally against the illegal interference, then to break up the processions and leave their members to find their own way to the Square. It was also decided to go Sunday after Sunday to the Square, until the right of public meetings was vindicated.'

So dawned at last 'Bloody Sunday'. It was a dull, misty day, though the threatening rain held off. By ten o'clock in the morning 1,600 constables were on duty in the Square, while others—foot and horse—were posted at strategic points in the various main approaches. The processions, bearing music and banners, came from all parts, and united as they converged upon the common centre. They were challenged, of course, but the programme of formal protest and disbandment seems to have been forgotten in the heat of the moment, and severe fighting took place in Holborn, the Strand, and Parliament Street, with many injuries on both sides. Some units, however, reached the side of the Square practically unbroken; the procession from the north, headed by Mrs Besant and William Morris, was not challenged until it reached the end of Shaftesbury Avenue, where it was attacked without warning, dispersed as quietly as possible—Mrs Besant had her followers well in hand—and tried to approach the Square as arranged. The Square itself was still securely held by the police. A number of spectators had assembled,

among them many 'roughs', but the mounted police easily broke up the casual groups which formed, though greeted with jeers and occasional stones. But at last, about four o'clock, the Socialist leaders decided upon attack. A solid mass of two hundred men, led by R. B. Cunninghame Graham and John Burns, charged in from the south-east, and immediately fierce fighting broke out everywhere. The police held their ground, plying their truncheons busily; where they met with less resistance they assumed the offensive and charged the crowd. Disorder followed and seemed to be increasing when at last, as daylight faded to dusk, Life Guards appeared from the direction of Whitehall and the north side of the Square was occupied by a battalion of Foot Guards with fixed bayonets. The cavalry and the police then cleared the Square, not without brutality; no lives were lost, though two men died later from injuries received that day. Not less than one hundred and thirty men were treated that evening at the hospitals for hoof and baton injuries, and nearly a hundred were arrested.

Mrs Besant's part during the day itself was not exceptional. She tried, though unsuccessfully owing to the discretion of the driver, to break a charge of mounted police by drawing a wagonette across the roadway. It was now, the fighting over, that her battle began. According to Shaw she 'all but killed herself with overwork in looking after the prisoners, and organizing on their behalf a Law and Liberty League with Mr Stead'.* Stead—then editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette*, the one London paper which showed throughout some practical sympathy for the unemployed—opened a defence fund, Mrs Besant rallied her pledged bail, on the Monday got into the police court 'by sheer audacity, addressed the magistrate, too astounded by my profound courtesy and calm assurance to remember that I had no right there,

* *G. B. Shaw: Life and Works*, by A. Henderson.

and then produced bail after bail of the most undeniable character and respectability, which no magistrate could refuse '. The Law and Liberty League was established almost immediately to form a permanent organization for the defence of public and personal liberty ; they —she and Stead—sought to set up all over the country ' Ironside Circles ' which would provide centres of resistance against oppression. The League made little progress, and within eighteen months had practically ceased to exist ; nevertheless it served its temporary purpose.

Mrs Besant wished to arrange for the following Sunday another demonstration in the Square, but she was overruled, and Hyde Park was announced as the meeting-place. Warren laid down a route by which processions might proceed, but his pledge of a truce was broken and a procession assailed and turned back in Holborn. There was no meeting in the Square, but a crowd assembled, was charged by the police, and one man—Alfred Linnell —was so badly trampled on that he died a week or two later. His funeral was attended by Mrs Besant, Morris, Cunninghame Graham, Headlam, and thousands of others ; at Aldgate, it is said, the procession took three-quarters of an hour to pass one spot. Stead had already brought out a pamphlet attacking the Government—*Remember Trafalgar Square* ; now Mrs Besant followed it with another, of which over a hundred thousand copies were distributed, calling upon the people to boycott the police : ' To be a policeman now is to be a man who sells himself to maltreat his brethren at the orders of the new Tsar at Scotland Yard, and if such a man ranges himself against the people, the people must treat him like an enemy.' * *The Link*, later, carried on a constant warfare against the police, accusing them of exercising more and more flagrantly the covert practice of blackmailing prostitutes and of treating brutally the poor and

* Quoted in *Story of Trafalgar Square.*

prisoners. Sir Charles Warren consistently supported his subordinates, and, with a Tory Government possessing an overwhelming majority, protest in 1887 must have seemed as futile, as little regarded, as forty years later. 'We are,' wrote Mrs Besant in *Our Corner*,* 'drifting into Revolution, as Paris drifted one hundred years ago.' But the police force itself began to feel the strain, and in the following November *The Link* was able to note with rejoicing the retirement of Warren. Fortunately labour conditions improved, the majority of the unemployed were absorbed, and the unrest—for the time being—died down. In December 1887 William Morris wrote to Bruce Glasier: 'By the way, I must say that Mrs Besant has been behaving like a brick. She really is a good woman; though, as you know, in theory tarred with the opportunist stick.' †

3

For Mrs Besant the chief consequence of the Trafalgar Square conflict was her friendship with W. T. Stead—an important link in the chain leading her towards her next great change.

Stead was at this time thirty-nine years old, two years her junior. As editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette*, he had brought himself into prominence by a series of audacious escapades—agitations, interviews, attacks, his *Truth about the Navy* campaign, and the famous exposure of *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*. Now he was questing even farther afield, and the New Journalism, and with it Stead, was discussed and criticized everywhere. He was always ready, indeed eager, to take the part of the poor and ill-used, and it was his instant de-

* January 1888.

† *Wm. Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement*, by J. B. Glasier.

fence of those arrested and injured in Trafalgar Square that brought him and Mrs Besant together. He had already championed her in *The Northern Echo* as far back as 1877, and on coming to London had tried unsuccessfully to meet her. In 1885 he had defended her again, and his high opinion was strengthened by their close friendship, and retained to the end of his life. His biographer, Frederic Whyte, says of him that 'Stead had Mrs Besant on the brain at most times. His unswerving belief in her and his untiring championship of her are constantly in evidence'. *The Life of W. T. Stead* mentions too the 'interesting and charming letters . . . which now began to reach him day after day' from her, some from the Bouverie Street office of the Freethought Publishing Company, some from her home at 19 Avenue Road, St John's Wood. These letters—which blend 'warm humanity, intimate friendship, and affectionate fun'—'all begin playfully or informally—"My dear Head Centre", or "My dear Sir Galahad", or "My dear friend"; and they end usually—"*Addio*, A.B."; sometimes, "yours always, dear friend, St George". Most of them are on little square sheets of note-paper, with a big, gold-lettered "Annie" in the left-hand top corner, which gives them a jolly school-girlish look, quaintly incongruous with the desperate earnestness of *The Link*.'

The first issue of *The Link* appeared on February 4th 1888 and continued weekly to the following December 4th. Its immediate object was to work in conjunction with the Law and Liberty League, but its scope was wider. Mrs Besant was an Atheist still, Stead a Christian, but they had in common their desire to serve the suffering and to thwart the oppressor. Each had found the other wondering whether men 'might not be persuaded to be as earnest about making this world happy as they are over saving their souls', and this was the basis

of the small four-page halfpenny weekly. 'What we want to do is to establish in every village and in every street some man or woman who will sacrifice time and labour as systematically and as cheerfully in the temporal service of man as others do in what they believe to be the service of God.' Each issue bore on its front page a passage from Victor Hugo: 'The people are silence. I will be the advocate of this silence. I will speak for the dumb. I will speak of the small to the great and of the feeble to the strong. . . . I will speak for all the despairing silent ones. I will interpret this stammering; I will interpret the grumblings, the murmurs, the tumults of crowds, the complaints ill-pronounced, and all these cries of beasts that, through ignorance and through suffering, man is forced to utter. . . . I will be the Word of the People. I will be the breathing mouth whence the gag is snatched out. I will say everything.' Its fundamental object, the building up of a 'New Church, dedicated to the service of man,' is possibly of interest for the light it casts upon Mrs Besant's psychological tendencies, but what was of immediate importance was simply the way in which it proceeded to 'say everything'. It exposed starvation wages, unjust landlords, cruelty to children, insanitary workshops, extortion; Mrs Besant, in particular, went everywhere, saw all things, and hid nothing. Ben Tillett recalls her visit to the Victoria Docks to address six thousand men on a morning so foggy that she could scarcely see six of them, and could only speak into the mist her words of 'hope, joy, and courage'.* She herself recalls walking one night with Herbert Burrows, 'going back from a meeting of omnibus-men who had no time to join and work and plan for shorter hours, and we could only find them about midnight, and as we tramped through the snow and the mud I turned to him and said: "Herbert, I

* *Annie Besant, D.L.*

wonder why on earth we go on doing this ", and his answer was: " We can't help it!"'* Month in and month out they fought on with unremitting patience and devotion.

In the summer of 1888 *The Link* brought upon itself a battle of its own. Mrs Besant had always been interested in the problem of sex-antagonism in industry, then to a far greater degree than to-day caused by the theory, stated all but explicitly by employers in justification of small wages, that women could always add the sale of their bodies to the sale of their labour. She sought, of course, an economic independence apart from prostitution. On June 23rd *The Link* printed a sensational article by her entitled *White Slavery in London*, dealing with conditions prevailing in the match factory of Messrs. Bryant & May, Ltd. The firm's five-pound shares at that time were quoted at over eighteen pounds, and in one recent year a dividend of thirty-eight per cent had been paid, yet the girl employees were working ten hours a day and receiving weekly wages of from four to thirteen shillings (the average was under seven), with deductions for fines. A happy story was related of a partner who testified to his admiration for Gladstone by erecting a statue—stopping one shilling out of each girl's wages to help cover the cost of it, and giving a half-holiday (without pay) for the unveiling! Legal action was threatened against the paper, and the girls were bullied to discover who had given the information; they were pressed to sign papers declaring the statements lies, refused to do so, and in a moment of desperation came out on strike, some hundreds of them. They had no funds and no organization, and they turned naturally to their champion.

One Friday afternoon early in July ' between one and two hundred girls flocked down Fleet Street, cheered

* *Annie Besant, D.L.*

vigorously as they saw Annie Besant's photograph in the window, and turning into Bouverie Street filled that narrow thoroughfare'.* After a fortnight of hard fighting the firm capitulated, taking back all the girls and making numerous concessions. Though the London Press for the most part concealed and misrepresented the facts with the utmost competence and discretion, still the publicity was too much for the shareholders, many of whom were clergymen. The Women Matchmakers' Union was formed, and for some years Mrs Besant was its secretary. This was, say Sidney and Beatrice Webb, the first case of the workers winning a struggle not because of their strength but because of their weakness, as a result of public intervention. In fairness to the firm concerned a comment by Mr John Scurr, M.P., must be noted: 'When Annie Besant went out on her fight it was considered by the workers in the East End of London to be a reproach to be employed in Bryant & May's factory: you were in the lowest strata of society if you entered the gates of that place. As a result of that fight that factory is now one of the model factories; every person employed there is a Trade Unionist, and as far as it is possible in present conditions to solve the unemployment problem, they have solved it for their own industry. That all sprang from the work Annie Besant started down there.' †

It was at this time, towards the end of the eighties, that most of her work for Trade Unionism was done—speaking, writing, and organizing. Keir Hardie gives a glimpse of her at the Annual Trades Union Congress at Bradford in September 1888: 'Mrs Besant attends as frequently as she can. She is not tall, and has a slight stoop, probably the result of a too close application at her desk; wears her hair short, and has on a red tam-o'-shanter; silver streaks are not wanting among her

* *The Link*, July 14th.

† *Annie Besant, D.L.*

tresses'.* Two months later, with John Burns, Tom Mann, and Keir Hardie she attended the International Trades Union Congress held in London, and caused a break with the somewhat conservative Parliamentary Committee by advocating definitely Socialist views. In 1889 she attended the Marxist Congress in Paris which formed the nucleus of the Second International.

Particularly noteworthy was one piece of work she did for Trades Unionism as a member of the London School Board. She was elected—with Stewart Headlam and A. G. Cook of the London Society of Compositors—for the Tower Hamlets division in November 1888, as a Social Democrat, Secularist, and avowed champion of Trade Union Wages. Bitter passion was roused against her before the election, but she headed the poll by a majority of nearly three thousand votes. At the Board's first meeting early in 1889 a contract came up for discussion, and it was asked whether the payment of Trade Union wages should be made a condition. Mrs Besant spoke in support of a motion from Mr Cook, Headlam joined in, the matter was held over for inquiry, and in the end the point was gained. The London School Board was, in consequence, the first public body to say that henceforth it would insist on all contractors paying 'Fair Wages'. George Lansbury declares: 'The effect of this resolution was electric throughout the world of Labour. Everywhere an agitation was set on foot to secure that all government and municipal contracts should contain such a clause, and although we have not secured all we hoped for, yet the great municipalities and the Government have all adopted the resolution in such a form as ensures that whether there is a Trade Union or no a standard rate of pay and hours of labour shall prevail.' †

* *Keir Hardie*, by W. Stewart.
† *Dr Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work.*

She took her work upon the Board very seriously. Again George Lansbury may be quoted: 'I think the next few years of her life and work are amongst the most successful of any she has lived, for she secured by sheer persistence and personal endeavour a much higher standard of education for our children; but, more important than all questions of reading, writing, and arithmetic, it was her work which threw into prominence the absurdity of trying to educate half-starving children, and laid the foundation for the splendid system of medical examination and treatment now existing in all our elementary schools, coupled with the establishment of feeding centres.' All this while her lecturing, writing, editing, and Socialist and Trade Union organizing activities went on as usual.

It is indeed a curious commentary upon this period which one gets in Stead's statement that during these years she was continuously ill and sad at heart, and saw no light ahead and would have welcomed death!

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Yet, busy as she was, she found time for other interests. She may have wished to die, but none the less she quested eagerly for a new way of life. In 1886 she was still looking confidently forward to the day, 'already its dawn is on the mountains of knowledge, when man shall live free in a world without God.' * In 1887, debating in *The National Reformer* with the Rev G. F. Handel Rowe, she declared Atheism logically tenable and a satisfactory system for the guidance of human conduct. She also published a pamphlet in which, like Job Huss in *The Undying Fire*, she took the 'argument from the *absence* of design, the want of adaptation, the myriad failures,

* *The World and its Gods.*

the ineptitude and incompetencies of nature' as a scientific basis for disbelief in God.* In the same years he attended an International Freethought Congress held in London. As late as the beginning of 1889 she was still, for all that the majority of her friends could tell, as 'uncompromising and aggressive' an Atheist as ever. On January 4th 1888 she wrote to Stead: 'Good night and *Addio*! Is it not queer that your "God bless you" to me somehow has a sort of comforting sound in it? Yet on the whole, dear friend, my creed has on one point a loftier touch than yours, for it makes the performance of duty so wholly its own reward. We have no crowns on the other side.' †

This claim to a loftier creed was, perhaps, one way of keeping her heart up, but one doubts whether it can be called altogether honest, for by this time she was well aware of a growing dissatisfaction, and indeed had gone some distance in search of a remedy. She had 'long been deeply troubled as to the "beyond" of all my efforts at social and political reform'. The Socialist position, however economically sound, did not suffice; she needed, for her constant inspiration, something more than a political faith: 'Where to gain the inspiration, the motive, which should lead to the realization of the Brotherhood of Man?' For a while she had been content simply with the negative case of Atheism against supernaturalism. Then she had turned to scientific work, and for 'ten years of patient and steadfast study I sought along the lines of Materialistic science for answers to the questions on Life and Mind to which Atheism, as such, gave no answer'. From biology her interest shifted to psychology, yet she could find nowhere 'one gleam of light on the question of questions: "What is Life? What is Thought?"'

* *Why I Do Not Believe in God.*
† *Life of W. T. Stead.*

The problems which particularly puzzled her (according to a list * she herself compiled) related to :

1. Hypnotic and mesmeric experiments, clairvoyance, etc.
2. Double consciousness, dreams.
3. Effect on body of mental conceptions.
4. Line between object and subject worlds.
5. Memory, especially as studied in disease.
6. Diseased keenness of sense-perception.
7. Thought transference.
8. Genius, different types of character in family, etc.

Seeking some answer she studied hypnotism, clairvoyance, the phenomena of spiritualism, dreams, illusions, and telepathy, and the more she studied the more inadequate appeared the materialistic hypotheses. 'Fact after fact came hurtling in upon me, demanding explanation I was incompetent to give.' 'Materialism not only could not answer, but declared an answer impossible. There was no question of waiting—but of resigning all hope or finding a new road.' † For Mrs Besant the alternative was no alternative ; to stand still was to perish—the quest for the new road began.

It began, seemingly, in 1886 ; in November 1887 she could still write in *Our Corner* : 'Very strange are some of the publications of this last quarter of the nineteenth century. what is to be said of such a magazine as *Lucifer*, "a theosophical monthly"? It has a very effective cover, but the contents are mere ravings; it may suffice to say that during the perusal of one story the reader is requested to accept the "theory of the reincarnation of souls as a living fact".' ‡ Twenty-two

* *Review of Reviews*, October 1891. † *Why I Became a Theosophist.*

‡ This was not the first time she had commented in unsympathetic terms on the work of her future 'revered teacher'.

months later she was herself affirming in the pages of *Lucifer* itself her belief in reincarnation.

The first span of the bridge leading from one point of view to the other was erected by a chance reading of A. P. Sinnett's *The Occult World*, to which probably she was attracted rather by its exposition of the *idea* of occultism than by its account of his personal connection with Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society. She read also his *Esoteric Buddhism*, an account of the Theosophic universe, the constitution of man, the planetary chains, the past history of the earth, and similar matters; the information given was avowed to be not the result of study, but derived directly from the communications of the Masters. These books 'did not carry me very far, but they suggested a new line of investigation; and from that time onward, I was on the look-out for other clues which might lead me in the direction I sought. These clues were not definitely found until early in the year 1889. I had experimented to some extent, then, and many years before, in spiritualism, and found some facts and much folly; but I never found there an answer, nor anything which carried me further than the mere recordal of certain inexplainable phenomena.' * She was not altogether alone in her investigations, and she knew from her wide and various reading that there were others exploring in the same directions—yet it was a lonely path as far as the majority of her comrades and friends were concerned, and to others (excepting Herbert Burrows) she talked little of it. But at last, early in 1889, she had a definite experience. A voice, that seemed to ring out 'within me and yet without me', spoke to her as she sat alone, late one evening, in a silent city office. It asked: 'Are you willing to surrender everything in order that you may know the truth?' She answered: 'Surely, that is all I need.' It insisted: 'Is there nothing that

* 1875–1891: *A Fragment of Autobiography.*

you hold back: will you let all go?' Again she responded: 'There is nothing I will not surrender, if I can only know.' 'Within a very little time,' the voice promised her, 'the Light shall arise.' 'And then again the silence fell, and I was left wondering what had occurred.' *

The promise was quickly fulfilled. Stead had already, in 1888, become acquainted with Madame Blavatsky through the persuasions of the famous Madame Novikoff, who was 'charmed by her powerful intellect'. 'I was,' Stead recorded, 'delighted with, and at the same time somewhat repelled by, Madame Blavatsky. Power was there, rude and massive, but she had the manners of a man, and a very unconventional man, rather than those of a lady. But we got on very well together, and Madame Blavatsky gave me her portrait, certifying that I might call myself what I pleased, but that she knew I was a good theosophist.' † When in the spring of 1889 *The Secret Doctrine* was published, its two bulky volumes were sent to *The Pall Mall Gazette* for review. Stead looked at them, and quailed. His reviewers too fought shy, until at last—it is said at Shaw's suggestion—they were offered to Mrs Besant, who was considered 'quite mad enough on these subjects to make something of them'.

She was, and she did. She sat conscientiously at home and read day after day, and as she read she 'remembered, and the whole philosophy fell into order before me, although to this brain and in this body it came before me for the first time'. Here, recognized instantly, was the revelation she had been seeking, not merely of the relations between, but of the cause of, phenomena, the bridge between matter and thought

* *Initiation.* This account was given some twenty-three years after the event.

† *The M.P. for Russia.*

revealed at last. She obtained, immediately, an introduction to the author, and a few days later went with Herbert Burrows to meet her. The eccentric lady was on her best behaviour, for she was, Sinnett has said, anxious to enlist Mrs Besant in her cause, and so 'evidently took care to keep her loftiest characteristics well in evidence'. There was 'nothing special to record, no word of Occultism, nothing mysterious, a woman of the world chatting with her evening visitors'. Only at the last moment did she pass beyond 'the easy brilliant talk', 'two brilliant, piercing eyes met mine, and with a yearning throb in the voice' she said simply, 'Oh, my dear Mrs Besant, if you would only come among us!' Mrs Besant 'felt a well-nigh uncontrollable desire to bend down and kiss her, under the compulsion of that yearning voice, those compelling eyes'. But pride and caution held her back. The invitation, however, with all that it implied, was not—for reasons suggested elsewhere—to be resisted. She went again and then again to Lansdowne Road to question Madame Blavatsky about Theosophy. On the third visit she was told to read, before going further, the Psychical Research Society's report upon the Theosophical Society and its founder. It was either a very honest or a very shrewd suggestion. Mrs Besant read the report and rejected it with characteristic impetuosity and scorn. In May 1889 she became a Fellow of the Theosophical Society.

'Humanly speaking,' Stead has declared, 'if Madame Novikoff had not been so insistent in making me call upon Madame Blavatsky, the Theosophical Society might never have secured the adhesion of Annie Besant.' *

Bernard Shaw has related how one day in the editorial office of *The Star* he idly picked up a proof headed *Why I Became a Theosophist.* 'I immediately looked down at the foot of the slip for the signature, and saw that it was

* *The M.P. for Russia.*

Annie Besant. Staggered by this unprepared blow, which meant for me the loss of a powerful colleague and of a friendship which had become part of my daily life, I rushed round to her office in Fleet Street and there delivered myself of an unbounded denunciation of Theosophy in general, of female inconstancy, and in particular of H. P. Blavatsky. . . . I played all the tricks by which I could usually puzzle her, or move her to a wounded indignation which, though it never elicited a reproach from her (her forbearance with me was really beyond description), at least compelled her to put on herself the restraint of silence. But this time I met my match. She listened to me with complete kindness and genuine amusement, and then said that she had become a vegetarian (as I was) and that perhaps it had enfeebled her mind. In short, she was for the first time able to play with me ; she was no longer in the grip of her pride ; she had after many explorations found her path and come to see the universe and herself in their real perspective.' *

The next few years were, for the most part, a period of withdrawal. She perceived the world from a new standpoint, and her immediate impulse was to draw back from the numerous activities which so long had occupied her. Her perversion to Theosophy, as it was called, was the cause of much controversy and of bitter attacks by Freethinkers. She never again seemed comfortable in the National Secular Society, and in 1890 she resigned all office, feeling that it ' was so identified with Materialism that it had no longer place for me '. On August 30th 1891 she appeared for the last time as a lecturer upon the platform of the Hall of Science ; Bradlaugh had died in the previous January, and the new leaders—G. W. Foote in particular—were opposed to her using their platform for Theosophical propaganda. During September and

* *Dr Annie Besant : Fifty Years in Public Work.*

October 1890 she took part in the Fabian Society's Lancashire Campaign against the northern stronghold of Toryism—her last active work for the Society. 'Early in November,' writes E. R. Pease, 'she suddenly and completely severed her connection with the Society. . . . Some twenty years later she lectured on several occasions to the Society, and she joined her old friends at the dinner which celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of its foundation, but in the interval her connection with it completely ceased.

'The Fabian Society and British Socialism owe much to Mrs Besant for the assistance she gave it during five important years. Her splendid eloquence, always at our service, has seldom been matched and has never been surpassed by any of the innumerable speakers of the movement. . . . She was not then either a political thinker or an effective worker on committees, but she possessed the power of expressing the ideas of other people far better than their originators, and she had at her command a certain amount of political machinery . . . which was very useful. Her departure was a serious loss, but it came at a moment of rapid expansion, so rapid that her absence was scarcely felt.' *

The same impulse led her, in April 1891, to withdraw from circulation *The Law of Population*. Though one may agree with her that 'passing from Materialism to Theosophy I must pass from neo-Malthusianism to what will be called asceticism', it is not so easy to agree with her action.† Her original arguments—that 'in all this there is nothing which for one moment implies licentiousness, profligacy, unbridled self-indulgence', and

* *History of the Fabian Society.*

† In a pamphlet account of Mrs Besant's life, issued by the Theosophical Society in 1927, we read, however, that 'she still holds birth control to be legitimate for young married couples and for married people unable or unwilling to lead a celibate life'. Either her views have changed since 1891, or we may question more than ever her justification.

that in practical matters one has to deal with things as they actually are—held good against Theosophy as against Christianity.

In 1891, too, she refused re-election to the London School Board, and two years later in 1893, with her first visit to India and her decision to make it her home for the future, she achieved a practical renunciation of all her past. She must have seemed merely to seal it by her declaration in 1894 : ' My work in the sphere of politics is over, and I shall never resume it.'

The friends who in England had been in daily contact with her now ceased to see her at all ; her life in England, her part in English politics and English social reform, were over for ever. Henceforth she was to give herself wholly to Theosophy—and to India.

INTERLUDE ON CONVERSION

WITH REGARD TO Mrs Besant's conversion to Theosophy nothing needs more to be stressed than that it was, absolutely, a logical conclusion to all that had gone before. It might almost have been prophesied, had anyone possessed sufficiently intimate knowledge and subtle perception. She has been accused more than once of changing her colours, turning her coat, but always each step has been inevitably led up to by the preceding one.

> 'Stiff in opinions, always in the wrong,
> Was everything by starts, and nothing long,'

her enemies have chanted, but at least she has always been loyally and vitally herself. Even though one takes the most comprehensive list of her changes, still there may be traced through them all a single unbroken curve. In point of fact there have been two real changes only, from Christianity to Atheism, and from Atheism to Theosophy; from a religion of external authority to one of individual authority, and from that of individual authority to that of external authority; from Catholicism to Protestantism, and from Protestantism to Catholicism—a progress which might be paralleled in its general significance if not in its details by many eminent contemporaries.

Her quest—the quest which her whole life has been—was always intrinsically religious, her real interest lay in her personal destiny, and when her spiritual development has demanded it she has never hesitated to abandon a cause, however lost or triumphant. Undoubtedly her attitude has been egotistical; but so, disguise it as we may, is that of every spiritual pilgrim, who, even in denying it, attests that the personal inner experience is

the only real one. Like Tolstoy she has always known that she could live by faith alone.

Her life, then, has been simply a quest for a satisfactory faith, one which would prove adequate to all experience, to which every aspect of being could be duly related. She rejected the Christianity of the Churches because it could not satisfy her intellectual experience; she rejected Rationalism because it made no provision, she felt, for her mystical emotional experiences and knowledge; she accepted Theosophy because, rightly or wrongly, it seemed to her that she found in it satisfaction for both. She sought a religion not to submit to, denying some part of herself or of the universe as she perceived it, but one that she might embrace, expanding herself in a perfect freedom. Such a faith was necessary to her—it may be suggested that in the close union she has invariably attained between faith and efficiency, belief and action, there is something almost psychopathic. She has always been primarily emotional, her emotional susceptibility extreme. The power to possess her of purposes based upon her beliefs is clearly illustrated in a passage from her *Autobiography*: 'I have ever been the queerest mixture of weakness and strength, and have paid heavily for the weakness. . . . As the young mistress of a house, I was afraid of my servants, and would let careless work pass rather than bear the pain of reproving the ill-doer; when I have been lecturing and debating with no lack of spirit on the platform, I have preferred to go without what I wanted at the hotel rather than to ring and make the waiter fetch it; combative on the platform in defence of any cause I cared for, I shrink from quarrel or disapproval in the home, and am a coward at heart in private while a good fighter in public.' The moment her faith became involved she was capable of 'limitless sacrifice for human good', and all inhibitions were broken down in the passionate desire to satisfy 'what

has always been the deepest craving of my nature—the longing to serve as ransom for the race'. Always her faith has been directed to this end of satisfying her desire to serve wider interests than the personal, and consequently she has been able at all times to translate belief immediately into action. For at no stage has she ever lost faith—*she does not know the meaning of real scepticism*; all she has done has been to transfer faith from God to Man, and from Man to the Masters. Her Atheism was never built, like that of Bertrand Russell, 'only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair', but still, at its extreme, upon the most lively acceptance. Her faith in Atheism was not less ardent than her faith in Christ.

Yet religious though her pilgrimage has been, is it too much to suggest that her nature is active rather than contemplative, worldly rather than saintly in the truest religious sense? That is why, perhaps, she has proved the sanest of religious leaders. It was only in girlhood—and no doubt then only because she had no other outlet—that she permitted her faith to carry her to extremes; ever since she has preferred to substitute for ascetic renunciations the sacrifice of comfort and ease in labour for the good of others. The peculiarity which more than anything else gave to her changes the appearance of suddenness, of moving from one position confidently held to another equally confidently held, was her ability to act upon a belief, even to assert it militantly, when to some degree it had ceased to satisfy her. That she could do this there can be no doubt, for even Bradlaugh was deceived: 'For thirteen years she had stood upon the same platform with him, and when one day she said that for ten years she had been dissatisfied with her own teaching, he felt it very keenly.' There was no element of deception or dishonesty in this; simply she was psychologically capable of preserving one firm foothold

even while she cast about to find another. Until she came to the point of conviction she could dissociate faith and doubt, however far the latter ate away the foundations of the former ; once convinced, the flood tide of the new belief swept in and shattered the shell of the old in an instant. Here surely we have an indication of an unusual lack of self-knowledge, an absence of any vitally sustained harmonious unity.

Conversion is a process by which a divided personality, by attaining a profounder level of comprehension of what are seen as realities, resolves its conflicting elements. After a period of mental unrest, perplexity, stress, the whole situation is suddenly perceived anew, flooded by unexpected light in which all difficulties vanish ; relaxation and self-surrender follow strain, and with them the sense of firmness and stability. Self-surrender is the vital turning-point, and the mental peace and sense of expansion which result arm the person converted against all the slings and arrows of the world.

The effect of each of Mrs Besant's conversions was the same—an expansion, in one case from a limiting God, in the other from a limiting Rationalism, both equally obnoxious to her. But it is important to note, in coming at last to the point of her arrival at Theosophy, how *tentative* was her acceptance of Atheism, militantly though she championed it. (Atheism as she understood it was necessarily tentative.) In her first Atheist essay, *On the Nature and the Existence of God*, she admitted that the one argument for God's existence which seemed to her to have any real weight was the argument from instinct. 'The nature of man has in it certain sentiments and emotions which, reasonably or unreasonably, sway him powerfully and continually ; they are, in fact, his strongest motive powers, overwhelming the reasoning faculties with resistless strength ; true, they need discipline and controlling, but they do not need to be, and

they cannot be, destroyed. The sentiments of love, of reverence, of worship, are not, as yet, reducible to logical processes; they are intuitions, spontaneous emotions, incomprehensible to the keen and cold intellect. They may be laughed at or denied, but they still exist in spite of all; they avenge themselves, when they are not taken into account, by ruining the best laid plans, and they are continually bursting the cords with which reason tries to tie them down.' In the next paragraph she gave evidence of her own natural 'instinct to worship': * 'Whatever the root and the significance of this instinct, there can be no doubt of its strength; there is nothing rouses men's passions as does theology; for religion men rush on death more readily and joyfully than for any other cause; religious fanaticism is the most fatal, the most terrible power in the world.' When she rejected, her rejection was by no means final:

* In Professor Sante De Sanctis's 'bio-psychological study' of *Religious Conversion* (Kegan Paul, 1927) will be found, pp. 258–261, a list of six 'psychic situations favourable for the occurrence of religious conversion', each one of which is clearly discernible in the case of Mrs Besant. They are:

(i) 'The presence of general religious tendencies or "religiosity", deriving either from heredity, from the family, or from impressions in the infancy or childhood of the individual.'

(ii) 'An habitual tendency of the intellect towards absolute convictions, whether affirmative or negative, in respect of philosophy, theology, politics, etc.'

(iii) 'A tendency of the individual spontaneously to fix the attention beyond and above the realities of the senses.'

(iv) 'A richness of affective potential.' (Or ardency of temperament.)

(v) 'The tendency of the individual to transfer his chief interests to questions of origin, purpose, destiny, and so forth. A richness of affective potential, in association with a facility for its displacement and transference, is characteristic of all enthusiasts and fanatics.'

(vi) 'The recurrence of painful experiences; to these we must assign more importance as a criterion of predicting the occurrence of conversion when their external reactions are deeper and less visible.'

These 'states' have a purely psychological significance, and prove nothing as to the validity or otherwise of the faith accepted or rejected. But it is interesting to note them as evidence of Mrs Besant's tendency to conversion, as it were, in the void.

'Our faculties fail us when we try to estimate the Deity, and we are betrayed into contradictions and absurdities; but does it therefore follow that He is not? It seems to me that to deny His existence is to overstep the boundaries of our thought-power almost as much as to try to define it.' Her essential position was a simple refusal to believe without evidence of a satisfactory nature.

It was, as we have seen, a negative position which did not long satisfy her. Long before the day of her actual conversion to Theosophy she had come to realize that a Rationalism based on the logical workings of the intellect offered at best but a superficial solution. Followed to its ultimate conclusions it brought her, as it brought Tolstoy, to a recognition that 'the only incontestable knowledge accessible to man' through the medium of the intellect alone is that of 'the meaningless absurdity of life'. Logic was not enough; to its findings her dumb intuitions were opposed; and her mystical intuitional knowledge absolutely overthrew—to use a phrase of William James—'the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe'. Her increasing certainty of the existence of other forms of consciousness reacted destructively upon her belief; she became more and more open to conviction of the possibility of other orders of truth. So dissatisfaction drove her to investigate the various problems of consciousness, and the results of investigation added to her dissatisfaction. A vast emptiness of black doubt grew ever within her; more and more imperative became the need for a faith which would at once permit her to retain her intellectual integrity and give warrant to her mystical experiences.

At last, when the night of doubt seemed but growing darker, came *The Secret Doctrine*. It was like a flash of light, but its illumination endured: 'As I turned over page after page the interest became absorbing; but how

familiar it seemed; how my mind leapt forward to presage the conclusions, how natural it was, how coherent, how subtle, and how intelligible. I was dazzled, blinded by the light in which disjointed facts were seen as parts of a mighty whole, and all my puzzles, riddles, problems, seemed to disappear. The effect was partially illusory in one sense, in that they all had to be slowly unravelled later, the brain gradually assimilating that which the swift intuition had grasped as truth. But the light had been seen, and in that flash of illumination I knew that the weary search was over and the very Truth was found.'

It seems indeed singularly a book devised to meet her needs. Opening it at random one encounters sentences which must have leaped out of the page as she read them: 'The ever-unknowable Cause alone should have its shrine and altar on the holy and ever-untrodden ground of our heart—invisible, intangible, unmentioned, save through "the still, small voice" of our spiritual consciousness.' 'No more than Science does esoteric philosophy admit a special creation. It rejects everything "miraculous", and accepts nothing outside the uniform and immutable laws of Nature.' Here was the existence of a personal God denied in favour of a somewhat subtle form of Pantheism. Here it was proclaimed 'that no religion since the very earliest has been entirely based on fiction, as none was the object of special revelation; and it is dogma alone which is ever killing primeval truth. Finally, that no human-born doctrine, no creed, however sanctified by custom and antiquity, can compare in sacredness with the religion of Nature.' Cunningly it took all the good in religion and gave it to revelation, while automatically attributing all its evil to the stupid errors of mankind; not less cunningly it stole the thunder of modern science and reproduced it in surroundings so completely new that criticism was stifled.

In the intricate system it offered there was a place for every doubt, objection, and hypothesis. It gave the intellect its fullest scope, and yet allowed even fuller authority to those compelling mystical states which so perturbed Mrs Besant. Certainly, 'the theory of the universe which engages the attention of the student of Theosophy comes to him on the authority of certain individuals, as does every other similar theory, religious or scientific', but it was promised that with study all these statements would be verified. Nothing *must* be accepted in advance, though then progress *was* more rapid. In her review* of the book Mrs Besant admitted her 'constant feeling of unsatisfied desire for evidence, despite the sweep of conception and the coherency of the whole. . . . We crave for some proof of these revealers'; *but nevertheless her acceptance was immediate —in no sense did it wait upon proof*: she 'plunged headlong into Theosophy and let my enthusiasm carry me away'. She gave way upon one point because by so doing mental peace was assured to her upon a multitude of others.

It is for this reason mainly, I think, that her conversion to Theosophy must be looked upon as a step backward rather than forward, a step from Protestantism to Catholicism. As she said later, 'A refusal to believe until proof is given is a rational position; denial of all outside our own limited experience is absurd.' But to believe upon the promise of forthcoming proof is quite another matter. She herself pointed out in attacking Christianity that an argument which would be valuable to the believer makes no impression at all upon the sceptic. Adopting such a belief, she failed by her own high standards. Her rejection of Christianity had been, like much nineteenth-century Rationalism, a revolt of the individual against imposed authority, a claim in

* *Pall Mall Gazette*, April 25th 1889.

fact for the individual's absolute mental and spiritual autonomy. She rejected specifically the ideal of 'the slave, poor, meek, broken-spirited, humble, submissive to authority, however oppressive and unjust', and put forward in its stead the ideal of 'the free man who knows no lord, who brooks no tyranny, who relies upon his own strength, who makes his brother's quarrel his, proud, true-hearted, loyal, brave'. She asserted the masculine ideal over the feminine, the ideal of the West above that of the East; it might be imagined that she looked forward to a time when all spiritual authority would be set aside, when the free human spirit would be able no longer to accept seriously, or to need, metaphysical forms imposed from without. But it was a position she could not maintain, one can only presume because she lacked the final degree of development. She could not achieve a complete synthesis within herself without the aid of some external faith and machinery. 'Undeveloped human beings,' says Keyserling, 'must believe in something external, because they have no other means of focusing their powers, of condensing them to dynamic unity.' She had proved the intellectual apprehension of reality inadequate, but her attempt to step beyond it to a deeper instinctive knowledge which would at the same time be intellectually satisfying was a failure. It was a step she could not take, suffering as she did the defects of her own qualities, paying with a lack of spiritual repose for intellectual strength and energy, with lack of fineness for ardour, with lack of sympathy, with even occasional bitterness for her absolute devotions. She began, if not to deceive herself, at least to make a denial of all for which she had previously stood, by a dogmatic acceptance—for it can scarcely be maintained that Theosophy, as understood by her, is not dogmatic.

The extent of her change may perhaps be illustrated by an incident which occurred during her first visit to

India. At Bombay a Hindu, who under her earlier influences had become an Atheist but apparently meant to display his continued devotion, confided to her his lack of faith (Theosophical presumably) and asked her advice as to the books he should read. She told him that he must pray, and when he, like a younger Mrs Besant before a more reasonable if less consistent Pusey, queried, ' Pray to whom ? ' she strove by exhortation to direct him into the path of faith.* It is not easy to absolve Mrs Besant wholly from that fault of too many ardent propagandists who regard themselves as Spirits of the Age, and suppose that when they change their minds the world has entered upon a new era.

* *Tributes to Dr Annie Besant.*

V

FROM PUPIL TO PRESIDENT

I

FROM THIS POINT forward Mrs Besant's energies are divided between Theosophy and India, neither of which can in the nature of things possess for the average reader the intrinsic importance of those earlier campaigns which helped to shape the modern English—and even American—attitude to both religion and Socialism. But this apart, the dramatic element in biography lies more than anything else in the development of personality in active conflict, and this tends to vanish in the latter half of her story. Theosophy has never roused—it could not rouse—the wide, intensive opposition wakened by Atheism and Socialism. The Theosophist's cross is negligence, not persecution, and Mrs Besant's part, as far as the world at large is concerned, has been not so much to hold off attack as by steady spadework to dig herself in to such purpose that sooner or later the world will find it impossible to disregard her any longer. The inner story of the Society itself is not undramatic, but its most enthralling moments are shrouded in a mystery which probably no historian can ever illuminate. In her Indian work there has been, indeed, no lack of conflict, but here, as the background grows larger, the personal factor shrinks. The fact is that with her conversion her personal story is ended. It can no longer matter what she *is*, but only what she *does*.

Upon joining the Theosophical Society Mrs Besant became at once the pupil of Madame Blavatsky, to whom

in every appreciable sense the Society owes its existence and first success. It has been since its foundation, in fact, primarily the creation of these two women, its Jesus and its St Paul. Others were helpful, these essential. But for the one it would have no existence ; but for the other it would exist certainly far less effectively. That Mrs Besant is a remarkable woman needs no more stressing ; Madame Blavatsky, whether charlatan or spiritual teacher, would deserve attention if only for her own intrinsic interest. As with all Theosophists, the ascertainable facts give but one side of the story ; the philistine biographer must present the official account, and leave belief—or credulity—to follow as it can.

Helena Petrovna Hahn was born of aristocratic Russian parentage at Ekaterinoslav on July 31st 1831. As a child she saw visions, walked and talked in her sleep, and used her remarkable mediumistic powers to torment the servants. She was seventeen when in a fit of bravado she became engaged to the elderly General Blatavsky ; like Mrs Besant, she repented too late. She too married, apparently, with no knowledge of sexual relations. For three months after the marriage she successfully preserved her virginity (this is an important point, heaven alone knows why !), then she fled. By way of the Caucasus she came to Constantinople, visited Egypt and Greece, and made the first of a number of unsuccessful efforts to enter Tibet, though at this time—1849 or 1850—she knew nothing of her destined mission. But having spent the spring of 1851 in Paris, she went to London and that August met, in Hyde Park one moonlight night beside the Serpentine (it was at the time of the Great Exhibition), the ' Master of her dreams ' in a physical body. From him she learned the purpose for which she was the chosen instrument, imperfect indeed but the best available—the formation of the Theosophical Society. From London she set sail to Canada,

crossed the United States to Mexico, studying native and other magic ; she was always a student of such matters, and presumably continued her investigations in India, where she arrived before the end of 1852. There she remained for two years, was again repulsed from Tibet, again impatiently and imperiously encircled the globe, and in 1855 was back in India.

Once more the sacred regions of Lamaism proved impenetrable, but her watchful Master got her safely out of India just before the Mutiny broke out. In 1858 she rejoined her family — but not her husband — in Russia. Her mediumistic abilities were being slowly supplanted by genuine occult powers. She spent some years in Tiflis, in 1863 visited Italy, and at last in 1864 penetrated by way of Central Asia to Tibet and her beloved Masters. Her stay was not too long to forestall the legend of her fighting in 1867 as a man under Garibaldi. Again she visited the East, Tibet, and Europe. Somewhere between 1870 and 1872 she found herself penniless in Cairo, and accepted the aid of a woman of spiritualistic and less exalted connections, who afterwards became Madame Coulomb. From the late sixties onward, following the period of training under her Master in Tibet, she worked definitely under the orders of the Brothers of ' the White Lodge, the Hierarchy of Adepts who watch over and guide the evolution of humanity ', and who had sent her out ' to initiate in the Western World a revival of interest in the truth of the Ancient Wisdom. She had herself been taught certain of the facts of Occultism, and the instructions given to her were to go out and " help people on to Truth ". No precise directions were given in the beginning as to how she was to do this work.' *

* *Golden Book of the Theosophical Society.* According to Theosophical teachings the Masters have, since the fourteenth century, made in the West at each century's close an effort to ' enlighten the white barbarians '. To

As a start she founded in Cairo a Spiritualistic society; it soon failed, and she passed on once more to Paris. By 1873 occult communication with the Masters was fully established, and in July she received orders to go to America. She landed in New York penniless, and of necessity lived quietly in Brooklyn for a year. Her probationary period was over, her serious work about to begin. To aid her she received a sum of money from a man she had befriended years before. It was rather as an interlude that, also about this time, she married (bigamously ?) a young Russian, of course becoming his wife 'only nominally'—and soon leaving him. In October 1874 she visited the home of the Eddy brothers —mediums of wide but transitory fame—and there met Colonel Olcott. From their meeting a progress hitherto largely legendary becomes, even if it loses few of its legendary aspects, a matter of documented history.

Madame Blavatsky was forty-three, Henry Steele Olcott a year younger. They made a queer pair: she a woman gross and ugly in later years, of aggressive and compelling personality, who ate too much and took too little exercise, with a vast capacity for work, and an impatient contempt for those who did not agree with her. Her unbounded energy turned easily to childlike fury; she had in many ways, suggests Mr G. B. Butt, her biographer, the mind of a child, riotously and spontaneously imaginative, and her behaviour was erratic and eccentric to a degree. Olcott, on the other hand, was an American of the older type, on his own confession in younger days 'a man of clubs, drinking-parties, mistresses, a man absorbed in all sorts of worldly public and private undertakings and speculations'; he was still complacent, pompous, 'patriarchal in appearance, cor-

these efforts—of which the Theosophical Society represents the fifth—has 'in fact been due the enormous acceleration of European and American progress'.

dial by nature', 'very honest and very vain', easily impressed and with no suspicion of his own deficiencies, and habitually preoccupied with preserving his self-importance; yet he possessed industry, patience, and considerable organizing ability. He had had already, according to Theosophical accounts, a distinguished public career. He was a lawyer, had been agricultural editor of *The New York Tribune*, and was known for his integrity as well as his ability. In the American Civil War he fought through the North Carolina campaign with the Federal forces, contracted a fever and was sent to the base to recuperate. He did not return to the front. The grafters were busy in all the Government departments, and the Colonel became Special Commissioner of the War department with full powers of investigation. But this was a glory which with the conclusion of the war necessarily departed, and it was as Special Correspondent of *The New York Daily Graphic* that he visited the Eddy homestead. In America there was in the seventies a widespread interest in Spiritualism which Olcott shared; Madame Blavatsky attracted him by her unusual psychic powers, and he continued the acquaintance on their return to New York. He became her pupil, and so much her devoted admirer as to occasion 'the silly and malicious gossip that our relations were not of a proper character'.

In the spring another abortive attempt was made to found a 'miracle club', but not until the autumn did the Theosophical Society come into existence. Madame Blavatsky had fascinated others by her powers, and on the evening of September 7th 1875 a small group assembled in her apartment to hear a paper on *The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Egyptians* read by G. H. Felt, a student of Egyptian mysticism who professed to be able to control 'elementals'. During subsequent discussion Olcott (occultly inspired, of course) suggested the

formation of a society to study such subjects, and on the following evening sixteen persons handed in their names as willing to join. Among them was W. Q. Judge, a young lawyer, like Olcott a pupil of Madame, who was to play an important part in the history of the Society. Officers were elected—Olcott as President, Madame Blavatsky as Corresponding Secretary, Judge as Counsel —and by-laws approved on October 30th, but November 17th, the date of the inaugural address, was fixed by Olcott as the official birthday. The Society seemed in its early years continually on the point of foundering. Felt failed to produce even 'so much as the wag of the tail of a vanishing elemental', and Madame Blavatsky, plunging almost immediately into the writing of her first book, *Isis Unveiled*, had no time to attend the meetings. Nevertheless it survived, and from 1879, when the two founders, who were for the first fourteen years of its existence its outstanding leaders, went to India, it has grown, though with fluctuations, from strength to strength.

Undoubtedly Olcott as President of the Theosophical Society sought to contralize all authority in his own hands; he fought openly and in secret against the attempts of Madame Blavatsky to make any division of his power. Reading his Theosophical reminiscences it is impossible to resist the impression of a tediously self-satisfied old gentleman, everlastingly dwelling, like all the early Theosophists, on his own loyalty and level-headedness. Secrets and ceremonies appealed to his childish American romanticism, and he invented for the Society a form of initiation for new members, passwords for testing strangers, and a clumsy hand-grip. For a brief period he imposed these absurdities upon Theosophists. Sinnett tells a story of a small figure of Buddha made of tin and mounted on wheels which Olcott particularly reverenced. On one occasion, in 1884, he attended a meeting of the

Society for Psychical Research, 'got up uninvited, and made a speech in his worst style, exhibiting and making much of his grotesque Buddha on wheels'.* The Theosophical Society seems to have treated him with not a little reverence; Madame Blavatsky mingled with her respect a good deal of evident contempt. He made a good figurehead, but no more. She it was who gave life to his organization.

This was proved in practical fashion upon more than one occasion. Following the publication of *Isis Unveiled* in 1877, correspondence began between the two founders and individuals in all parts of the world, but particularly in India, where, according to the Scriptures, still lived Adepts possessing knowledge of the entire cosmic system. Associations with individuals and organizations were formed, and in 1879 a 'committee' consisting of Olcott and Madame Blavatsky arrived at Bombay. Then came the period of occult phenomena—appearances of the Masters, precipitations of letters and objects—which made the Society notorious throughout the world. 'The normal for the time being had disappeared. If a duster had to be hemmed, an elemental did it. If pencils were needed, a hand was put forward, twisted the pencil about, and there were twelve in place of the one, and so on.'† Mr A. P. Sinnett published *The Occult World* and *Esoteric Buddhism*, both the acknowledged result of messages received from the Masters. These phenomena, says Mr G. B. Butt, formed at this time 'the chief advertisement of Theosophy. Without them the Theosophical Society might never have developed into anything more than a diminutive New York club or a group of fanatical students in India. It was the phenomena which brought not only notoriety, but converts.'‡ It brought some-

* *Early Days of Theosophy in Europe.*

† *London Lectures of* 1907.

‡ *Madame Blavatsky.*

thing more—' exposures '. The interest of the Society for Psychical Research was aroused when, as already mentioned, Olcott, then on a visit to London, exhibited his little tin Buddha and made his impromptu speech. From that time, Sinnett believed, the dislike and suspicion of the S.P.R. grew and grew.

Meanwhile, the missionaries gave battle in India. Madame Coulomb, stranded in Ceylon as Madame Blavatsky had been in Cairo, appealed to the Theosophical Society, and she and her husband obtained employment at the Headquarters, now settled at Adyar, near Madras. In 1884 they turned against their benefactors and sold to the local missionaries ' a series of letters purporting to have been written by H. P. B. to Madame Coulomb which, if genuine, showed H. P. B. to have been a conscienceless and heartless swindler, her phenomena plain frauds, her Society a collection of dupes, her Master a mere invention, her teachings a myth of the imagination '.*

Studied at this distance, the evidence on one side—this is a characteristic of Theosophical controversy—seems as unsatisfactory as that on the other.† But many members became uneasy, wondered whether it would not be better to confine their investigations to Philosophy and Metaphysics, and to leave Occultism alone. There was even, we read, a more serious defection ; at the original foundation in 1875 the Society had three sections : ' The highest or First Section is composed exclusively of proficients or initiates in Esoteric Science and Philosophy, who take a deep interest in the society's

* *Theosophical Movement.*

† In *The Theosophical Society and the Occult Hierarchy* (1925), Mrs Besant counters the frequent objection that in the appearance of the Masters there is always some possibility of trickery, by declaring that the Masters have said that ' it was not desirable . . . to give absolute proof of Their existence '. ' There were a number of people who would like to catch Them and dry Them, and put Them in a museum with labels attached to Them ; but They had no ambition in that direction, so far as They were concerned.'

affairs and instruct the President-Founder how best to regulate them, but whom none, but such as they voluntarily communicate with, have the right to know. The Second Section embraces such Theosophists as have proved by their fidelity, zeal, and courage, and their devotion to the Society, that they have become able to regard all men as equally their brethren irrespective of caste, colour, race or creed; and who are ready to defend the life or honour of a brother Theosophist even at the risk of their own lives. . . . The Third is the Section of Probationers. All new Fellows are on probation, until their purpose to remain in the Society has become fixed, their usefulness shown, and their ability to conquer evil habits and unwarrantable prejudices demonstrated.' * Now the Masters, a little hastily one feels, withdrew from participation, though they did not cease to assist their 'instrument'.

The worry of these attacks aggravated Madame Blavatsky's physical ailments—Bright's disease, an affection of the heart, a tendency to apoplexy—and early in 1885 she seemed to be dying. But her Master appeared to her, and 'put before her two alternatives. One of these was to escape from further calumny and suffering by quitting the body; the other alternative was to live on for a few years longer, in spite of the suffering still awaiting her. If she were to choose the latter alternative, there was the possibility of her achieving a great dream of hers, which was to write *The Secret Doctrine*, which she had been planning since 1882. H. P. B. chose the suffering still awaiting her, in order that she might leave a little more knowledge and inspiration to the few who were still faithful to the Masters. Thereupon her Master magnetized her with spiritual forces, so that instead of sinking in the course of the night she was distinctly on the road to recovery by the next

* *Golden Book.*

morning.' * But though the Masters could do this for her, they were unable to add the little more that would have meant so much, and to gain strength she had to leave India. She sailed for Europe, settling at last in Germany.

Then came the Hodgson report (based largely upon the Coulomb ' confessions ') in which the Committee of the S.P.R. came to its devastating conclusion : ' For our own part, we regard her neither as the mouthpiece of hidden seers, nor as a mere vulgar adventuress ; we think that she has achieved the title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting impostors in history.' † Necessarily all criticism centred upon her, and in her absence Olcott was persuaded to cut loose the Society from her and from her special teachings. Her resignation as Corresponding Secretary was accepted. But immediately interest lessened, ' numerous branches ceased to exist except on paper, the membership fell off in others ; contributions and dues lessened ; the Society was fast falling into mere discussion of the endless metaphysics of Hindu faiths and philosophies.' ‡ It became apparent that it could by no means live upon the thin wine of aspiration only, but needed the bread of a definite doctrine which Madame Blavatsky alone could supply. (Theosophists all recognize that ' with the departure of H. P. B. from India in 1885, *necessarily* the spiritual centre of the movement was transferred to the West.' §) Within a few months she was officially requested to resume her office.

Yet Olcott, primarily a practical man, remained averse to making the Masters too prominent, or depend-

* *Golden Book.*

† *Report of the Committee appointed to investigate Phenomena connected with the Theosophical Society.* Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research, Part IX, December 1885.

‡ *Theosophical Movement.*

§ *Golden Book.*

ing too much upon occult inspiration—an attitude which fits strangely with all one reads of his intimate intercourse with the Masters commencing in 1878 and lasting until the day of his death. This did not suit Madame Blavatsky; in September 1887, now in London, she founded a magazine of her own, *Lucifer*, in which, as Olcott put it, she could say what she pleased. She was able, it seemed, to work with no one except as the leader, and having disagreed with Sinnett, who ruled the London Lodge at that time, she organized in the following year the Blavatsky Lodge at the London Headquarters, gathering about her—to his annoyance—a band of disciples who acknowledged her as their spiritual teacher and received from her 'secret occult teachings', pledging themselves 'to serve the Masters faithfully, come what may'. This little group became the original Esoteric Section of the Society.* She told Olcott that he must ratify her action in establishing the Esoteric Section, also her headship of the European Section of the Society, or she would simply cut the whole organization in two. He knew that she was capable of doing it, and probably this as much as the letter from the Master Koot Hoomi, which was 'dropped phenomenally in his cabin' on board a steamship in the Mediterranean, persuaded him to accept her orders. Thenceforward, Mrs Besant has related, 'the Society began to gain a larger amount of hearing in the world because more life was poured into it, although the Masters did not take up their old position in it, nor constitute again the first section thereof.'

The battle had been Madame Blavatsky's and so was the triumph. She, not Olcott, formed as well as

* The Esoteric Section soon came to be called the Eastern School of Theosophy, in order to make clear that it had no official connection with the Society. The earlier name is quite common, however, and we may continue to use it here as expressing more clearly its purpose—the study of the esoteric mysteries.

founded the Society, and it was to her disciple, Mrs Besant, that she passed on her guardianship of its fortune and its teaching. Its condition, even at the time of her death in 1891, was not healthy, and not until the Judge and Leadbeater troubles had been disposed of—we will not say cleared up—did the Society at last enter comparatively smooth waters.

2

Thus Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society to the time of Mrs Besant's adherence. But two points remain before we return to the main track of our story. It would be pleasant to utter the last word on Madame Blavatsky; but that is impossible so long as she continues to be regarded from two utterly irreconcilable points of view. This 'Sphinx of the Nineteenth Century'—what was she, fraud or genius, charlatan or messenger of wiser Beings beyond our common knowledge? How must we place her? Even granting her sincerity, what value can we attach to her revelations?

One can but allow authority to speak. Some comments by Stead and the S.P.R. have been quoted; elsewhere Stead says: 'Madame Blavatsky was a great woman . . . a wonderful and powerful personality, the like of which I have never met either in Russia or in England. She was unique, but she was intensely human, and a woman to her heart's core. She aroused the passionate devotion of both men and women. She was to her followers as the oracle of God. They had this treasure in a very earthen vessel, but there it was.' *

Moncure Conway, on the other hand, when he met her in London—possibly in 1879—found that 'she had nothing that could be described as culture; and though

* *Review of Reviews*, June 1891.

the work *Isis Unveiled*, ascribed to her, was without value to me so far as I could read it, I have never believed she could write anything so elaborate'. She interested him mainly by 'her gossipy knowledge of contemporary persons and events', and he was astonished that others should take her so seriously. In 1884 he visited her at Adyar. He had already heard much of her sacrifices for the cause, but he 'saw no trace or suggestion of martyrdom at the Headquarters.' From the gateway a carriage-road wound in through a fine leafy park to a handsome bungalow with a spacious veranda. The house was well decorated and furnished. 'Madame was not pretty, but she was a notable figure, her eyes capable of every variety of expression, and her humour always playing.' When they were alone he questioned her about her 'strange performances'. 'She said, with a serene smile, "I will tell you, because you are a public teacher [here she added some flattery], and you ought to know the truth. It is all glamour—people think they see what they do not see—that is the whole of it."'* These words, naturally, are challenged by Theosophists, but Conway was a man of integrity, and his statement cannot be simply dismissed. He himself appreciated her cleverness. By such a confession, he said, she 'spiked his guns'; it was vague, there were no witnesses; she still retained her position but she stopped his inquiries. At Adyar, too, he encountered a number of scholarly Hindu adherents, who regarded Theosophy as destined to develop into 'the great Reformed Religion of India', and who resented the element of phenomena. But Madame Blavatsky, he judged, took little interest in the religious or any other regeneration of India. She 'was not a woman of imagination, she was a woman of the world'. Conway also alleges that the name of the Master Koot Hoomi was originally spelt Koothume,

* *My Pilgrimage to the Wise Men of the East.*

and was manufactured by Madame Blavatsky from the names of Olcott and Hume, another early Theosophist.

For Mr G. B. Butt the two volumes of *The Secret Doctrine* 'form the most magnificent and complex essay in cosmogenesis and anthropogenesis that has ever been written'; * and yet Madame Blavatsky's epoch-making works have apparently never received even the serious attention of any accepted authorities. Max Müller declared of *Isis Unveiled* that 'there is nothing in it beyond what was known already, chiefly from books that are now antiquated'. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* dismisses it and *The Secret Doctrine* as 'a mosaic of unacknowledged quotations' from numerous books on magic and mysticism, and there seems to be little of the contents of either work that has not been impeached from one source and another. Even Mr Lewis Spence, a not unsympathetic critic, writes: 'The revelations of Madame Blavatsky were no more than a *mélange* of Buddhistic, Brahmanistic, and Kabalistic matter.' †

Sinnett, a devoted Theosophist and wholly confident as to his own communications with the Masters, believed that she undoubtedly indulged in trickery.‡ Certainly the impression one gains of her character is not wholly reassuring. She had, perhaps, too much humour—a dangerous quality in a prophet. One might prefer her company to that of the majority of religious founders, but that is not quite the point.

Pass we now—as Mrs Besant would say—to the orthodox Theosophical view: 'Many are still alive who knew

* *Madame Blavatsky.*

† *Encyclopedia of Occultism*, article on Theosophy. He continues: 'The Theosophical Society has numbered within its members several persons of very high ability, whose statement and exegesis of their faith has placed it upon a much higher level and more definite foundation. If the system is intensely dogmatic, it is also constructed in a manner akin to genius, and evolved on most highly intricate lines. This system was to a great extent pieced together after the death of the original founder of the Society.'

‡ See his *Early Days of Theosophy in Europe.*

her intimately, though this band is slowly diminishing. They all bear testimony to a very powerful personality, whose influence was felt by all who eagerly sought truth. H. P. B. was utterly unconventional, and she had no truce with sham or hypocrisy, whether in religion or in social observances. The one thing which mattered to her was that a man should be eager and willing to brave public opinion in trying to live loyally by his ideals. . . . A fine sensitiveness to all points of honour was one of the most powerful elements in her character, and yet her lot was to be completely misunderstood and misjudged by the world, simply because she was not allowed, under her occult orders, to give always the full explanation of everything that she had to do in the carrying out of orders. . . . The services of H. P. B. to the world in general are manifold, but one especially stands out. This is the unification which she has given through her writings to the various departments of truth in which men have laboured through the ages. Before the beginning of the Theosophical Movement, for over two thousand years since the decadence of Greek civilization, there has been in Europe no religious and intellectual synthesis which a man of culture could confess. Life was broken up into departments severally of religion, art, and philosophy. Each in its own way had a great message, but few were able, outside of the Mysteries, to see a nexus between them all, and find a synthesis of truth. H. P. B. in her writings stated to the modern world this great synthesis which underlies everything. For the first time in the modern world, both in the East and in the West, a man of culture and understanding who in addition to his intellectual development has a deeply religious nature, can find in the Theosophical philosophy a full satisfaction of all of his aspirations. H. P. B. ushered in that great standpoint "of the Centre" which is the

high-water mark of every civilization. Many after her have added to the body of knowledge with which the Theosophical Movement was started by her. But in our days she was the first to build a bridge between religion, science, philosophy and art, and to construct that intellectual edifice in which thousands to-day live, finding through Theosophy the realization of all their hopes and dreams. H. P. B. will stand out in all the ages to come as one who brought the Light and ushered in a new age of Wisdom.' *

One's opinion, apparently, depends upon faith, one way or the other. That is the objection which must be urged, finally, against these 'revelations'—simply that they *are* revelations, that they reveal a story incapable in any ordinary way of proof or disproof. They must be accepted or rejected; one cannot, either way, question. But perhaps it is as unimportant what Madame Blavatsky historically was, as it is whether Jesus ever actually existed. Our present concern is with the way in which she was regarded by Mrs Besant, and the effect of that idea upon her disciple's life. Mrs Besant has uttered many appreciations of the woman who converted her to Theosophy. The following is both brief and a personal impression; it implies an absolute acceptance of her as a woman and as a divine teacher: 'What H. P. B. was the world may some day know. She was of heroic stature, and smaller souls instinctively resented her strength, her titanic nature. Unconventional, careless of appearances, frank to unwisdom—as the world estimates wisdom—too honest to calculate against the dishonesty of others, she laid herself open to continual criticism and misunderstanding. Full of intellectual strength and with extraordinary knowledge, she was humble as a little child. Brave to recklessness, she was pitiful and tender. Passionately indignant when

* *Golden Book.*

accused of things she loathed, she was generous and forgiving to a repentant foe. She had a hundred splendid virtues, and a few petty failings. May the Master she served with unfaltering courage, with unwavering devotion, send back to us again " the Brother you know as H. P. B. ; but we—otherwise ".' *

There remains the further point: What was the connection between the Theosophical Society and Theosophy ?

The Society, it may be admitted, has always been at pains to make clear its absolute neutrality, the right of a member to his own religious and other opinions, and Mrs Besant herself, as President, has asserted over and over again ' the fact that there is no doctrine, no opinion, by whomsoever taught and held, that is in any way binding on any member of the Society, none which any member is not free to accept or reject. Approval of its three objects is the sole condition of membership '. These three ' declared objects ', only the first of which is in fact absolutely insisted upon, are as follows :

' 1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.

' 2. To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science.

' 3. To investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.'

These objects are frequently put forward as though they represented the whole nature and purpose of the Society. Bradlaugh, it has been said, might have joined it, and so indeed, technically, he might, but it is quite certain that such a possibility never occurred to him. He would have seen at once—as anyone must—that for Mrs Besant, as for Madame Blavatsky and the majority of leading if not all members, these aims and even the

* *H. P. B. and the Masters of Wisdom.*

Society itself are of importance only just so far as they fulfil purposes definitely Theosophical—that is, implied by Theosophy.

The briefest glance at the esoteric history will make it abundantly clear that those who accept its account cannot treat the Society otherwise than as the instrument of Theosophy. For this relates how the Society was founded at the suggestion and under the direct supervision of the Brotherhood of the Great White Lodge; how it was the fifth of a series of similar attempts made at century intervals to form a nucleus upon earth for the transmitting of the Wisdom; and how one of its prime purposes—only recently revealed—is to prepare the way for the new coming of the Christ. When in 1885 the First Section, of the Masters themselves, 'ratted' it was soon seen that the Society was not prospering, and it became necessary to establish the Esoteric Section in order to carry out that purpose which the Society itself was failing to fulfil. No sooner had it come into being, says Mrs Besant, than 'the Society began to gain a larger amount of hearing in the world'.* Since then (1888) the Society has prospered continuously. In 1907 this First Section was reconstructed, and once again the Masters took up their old place in the Society. Immediately new interest and activity became apparent—the year 1909 saw a tremendous increase in membership. As Mrs Besant says, not only has the Esoteric Section (all members of which believe in the existence of Masters, and recognize an Inner Head of the School, who is a Master, to whom they pledge absolute obedience) been always 'the Heart of the Theosophical Society', but with the present 'we come to a period in the history of the Society which, in this case, takes its impulse largely from the attitude of those members who are students in the Esoteric School'. †

* *T.S. and the Occult Hierarchy.* † *Ibid.*

These statements reveal plainly enough her belief that Theosophy is the very life of the Society. From the moment of her adherence she professed a complete loyalty to the Masters, Madame Blavatsky, and Theosophy. As early as 1890, when her loved teacher was both ill and the subject of violent controversy, she declared :

'Now touching the position of H. P. B. to and in the Theosophical Society, the following is a brief exposition of it, as it appears to many of us :

'(1) Either she is a messenger from the Masters, or else she is a fraud.

'(2) In either case the Theosophical Society would have had no existence without her.

'(3) If she is a fraud, she is a woman of wonderful ability and learning, giving all the credit of these to some persons who do not exist.

'(4) If H. P. B. is a true messenger, opposition to her is opposition to the Masters, she being their only channel to the Western World.

'(5) If there are no Masters, the Theosophical Society is an absurdity, and there is no use in keeping it up. But if there are Masters, and H. P. B. is their messenger, and the Theosophical Society their foundation, the Theosophical Society and H. P. B. cannot be separated before the world.' *

Essentially, then, Mrs Besant regarded the Theosophical Society as a propagandist body for the Masters' teaching ; she not only declared it of little use for members to join solely on the strength of the three objects, but said even that the aims of the Society were, without Theosophy, impossible of achievement. 'Theosophy is a body of knowledge, clearly and distinctly formulated in part and proclaimed to the world. Members of the Society may or may not be students of this knowledge,

* *Lucifer*, December 1890.

but none the less it is the sure foundation on which the Masters have built the Society, and on which its central teaching of the Brotherhood of Man is based. Without Theosophy Universal Brotherhood may be proclaimed as an Ideal, but it cannot be demonstrated as a Fact.' *

Theosophical leaders, it may be said without qualification, have at all times been first and foremost Theosophists, and it is clear that any disciplined body must ultimately become what its leaders make it. 'As a matter of fact,' writes its late Vice-President, 'the idea of the Masters has been a trumpet call to sacrifice for most of those who have worked for the Theosophical Society.'† It is doubtful whether anyone to-day cares twopence for the Society apart from its definitely Theosophical doctrines. Certainly Mrs Besant does not; Theosophy is, for her, inconceivably more important than the Theosophical Society. That is the really pertinent fact. She believes in Theosophy; it is the final faith in which, after her long pilgrimage, she has found a secure refuge.‡

3

We may now return to the main thread of our narrative. Mrs Besant naturally did not remain long a hesitant novice in the Society. For the June 1889 issue of *Lucifer* she wrote an article, published without comment, on *Practical Work for Theosophists*. It reproved those members who were content simply to *join* the Society, and suggested practical methods of social service.

* *Lucifer*, October 1891. † *Golden Book.*

‡ At this point the question naturally arises: What, then, is Theosophy? Not to interrupt our history too long, however, this essential summary and criticism of Theosophy as a system have been banished to an Appendix. But the criticism, even more than the summary, is an integral part of this book, presenting in fact the point of view from which it, as a whole, is written.

Theosophy, she declared, must be justified in the eyes of the world by 'the sight of noble lives, strenuously and selflessly working for human good, battling against poverty and sorrow, the twin-daughters of Ignorance'. By September she was a regular contributor, and co-editor; soon she took the business side in hand and reorganized it upon a sound financial basis, an act quite beyond the interest if not the ability of her revered teacher, whose right hand she rapidly became. Madame Blavatsky, it is said, had always declared that her successor would be a woman, and her hopes were fixed at once on Mrs Besant. Signs of special favour speedily revealed themselves. In July 1889 she went from a six-day Labour Congress in Paris to join Madame Blavatsky at Fontainebleau. Sleeping there one night in a small room by herself, she was 'waked suddenly and sat up in bed startled, to find the air of the room thrown into pulsing electrical waves, and there appeared the radiant astral Figure of the Master, visible to my physical eyes'.* In the next few years she 'had a considerable number of such first-hand experiences'. A little later another devoted pupil of Madame Blavatsky, Countess Wachtmeister, unselfishly 'saw Annie Besant enveloped in a cloud of light—Master's colour. He was standing by her side with his hand over her head'. He appeared again—to the Countess's privileged eyes—during a lecture to London workmen: 'Suddenly the Master was by her side, and she spoke with an eloquence which I had never heard from her lips before.' † Madame Blavatsky assured the Countess that though Mrs Besant was 'not psychic or spiritual in the least—all intellect', still she was developing rapidly and her communication with the Masters was already direct.

When Olcott arrived in London that September he found the new disciple living at the Lansdowne Road

* *Case Against Judge.* † *H. P. B. and the Present Crisis.*

Headquarters with Madame Blavatsky. He noted in his diary 'her air of a woman of the toiling class, with her thick, laced boots, her skirts somewhat shortened to keep them tidy when trudging through the muddy streets of the East End, her red neckerchief of the true Socialist tinge, and her close-cut hair—in short, an Annie Militant. Some of our people of the upper class in society were prepossessed against her, thinking that no great good could come from her importation of her fads and cranks into our respectable body. Some even protested to me against having her living at Headquarters, as it might keep influential women away.' * He himself thought her a more important gain even than Sinnett—who probably supported the protests, for Sinnett was a snob, everlastingly insisting on his influence in 'what may in a broad sense be called the upper levels of society'; he resented the coming to London of both the founders, who were, he felt, for all his admiration for one of them, not quite the people to mix socially with *his* disciples. Olcott heard her lecture, and thenceforward could not restrain his praises of 'so grand an orator'. Before the end of 1889 she was President of the Blavatsky Lodge, and when, in December, Olcott bestowed upon his co-founder Presidential powers in the United Kingdom, Mrs Besant became one of the Appellate Board which he insisted upon as a curb to Madame Blavatsky's eccentric impulsiveness. When in the following year the European Section was organized under her authority, Mrs Besant was appointed to the advisory council.

Her conversion to Theosophy, as has been said, caused bitter attacks from her old comrades of the National Secular Society, but in a dramatic lecture † in the Hall of Science on August 11th 1889 she made it clear that at all costs she would follow her own path. 'Many years

* *Old Diary Leaves*, vol. IV. † *Why I Became a Theosophist.*

have passed since, in a quiet country vicarage, I took a vow to be true to truth, all through my life, and to follow her wherever she might lead me. On that first moment, when she called me, I left home, social position, friends, and went out alone into the world with my child in my arms. Later, her cry came to me once more, demanding that last wealth of mine, and I laid then my child at her feet as I had laid all else, so that I might keep unstained the loyalty I had sworn to her. And for the rest of my life, as in its past, this one fealty I will keep unstained. If friendships fail me they must fail; if human love leave me it must go; so that I be true to that one truth I follow, and strive to do her service in the world in which I live. She may lead me into the desert, I will go after her; she may strip me of all love, I will cling still to her; and I ask for no loftier epitaph on my tombstone than this: She Tried to Follow Truth.' The report in *Lucifer* adds: 'At brief intervals throughout the lecture she was greeted with vociferous and prolonged applause, and the Hindu gentlemen, who were present, conspicuous by their quiet mien, nodded their frequent approval in silent but significant manner.'

From this time forward she lectured in the new cause as busily as in the old; a vigorous propaganda was undertaken. In the spring of 1890, when the Society had to find new Headquarters, she came at once to the rescue. Eight years before she had purchased for £1,600 the least of 19 Avenue Road, and this she gave to the Society for the establishment of a permanent British Headquarters. Of the £545 still owing on the mortgage she herself paid £70 that same year. It was a large house standing in its own grounds, with a pleasant garden, shrubbery, and trees. Alterations and additions were made; two rooms were reserved by Mrs Besant for personal use, and the rest occupied by other special

disciples. 'The rules of the house were very simple, but H. P. B. insisted on great regularity of life; we breakfasted at eight a.m., worked till lunch at one, then again till dinner at seven. After dinner the outer work for the Society was put aside, and we gathered in H. P. B.'s room where we would sit talking over plans, receiving instructions, listening to her explanation of knotty points. By twelve midnight all the lights had to be extinguished.'

It was during or about 1890 that Mrs Besant's children finally left their father to join her, both becoming Theosophists. Her daughter soon married, however, while the son seems at no time to have taken active part in the work of the Society. The Rev Frank Besant, M.A., F.R.A.S., F.R.G.S., appears no more in this chronicle, vanishing into an undisturbed devotion to his parish duties and to the enlivening labour of copying parish registers.*

On April 1st 1891 Mrs Besant sailed from Liverpool for New York, to attend, as representative of Madame Blavatsky and the European Section, the Fifth Convention of the American Section of the Theosophical Society at Boston. She delivered in America a number of very successful lectures, attracted considerable newspaper attention, and returned to London early in May. She was on her way home when, on May 8th, Madame Blavatsky died after an illness of three weeks. Herbert Burrows went immediately to Queenstown to meet her and break the news. It was 'news' not only to Theosophists. *The Daily Chronicle* described the funeral in detail, and a few days later noted that no important action would be taken until Mrs Besant's arrival.

It was left until the autumn, however, and Mrs Besant's farewell address at the Hall of Science, for the

* *Parish Registers of Boston* (Lincs). Copied by Frank Besant. Lincoln Record Society. 1913.

real extent of public interest in Theosophy—or was it in Mrs Besant?—to become apparent. Bradlaugh had died in the previous January, but the control of the National Secular Society passed into the hands of a group—led by G. W. Foote—no more favourable to Theosophy and certainly less tolerant of Mrs Besant. She was informed, one feels not unreasonably, that while the Sunday morning lectures would remain 'free', the Sunday evening lectures were to be 'restricted to subjects on which the lecturers are in accordance with the Society'. She replied 'that she could not admit a censorship over her lectures, and therefore had to accept her exclusion from the platform she had occupied so often'. She resigned from the Society. On August 30th she gave her last address from the Hall of Science platform, *1875-1891: A Fragment of Autobiography*. Olcott accompanied her, and noted 'the large audience of intelligent faces', her voice 'vibrating with pathos' as she recalled her early memories, the obvious impression she made upon her audience, and the loud applause which ever and again interrupted her. She spoke, towards the end, under the stress of considerable emotion and having delivered her last characteristic sentences left the platform hurriedly—an action derided by Secularists as a means of evading criticism!

The address was printed in full by *The Daily Chronicle*, and quoted and commented on by virtually the whole British Press. Attention centred mainly on one statement, a few lines only, which referred to Madame Blavatsky and the letters from the Masters: 'Here is one fact which may, perhaps, interest you much, as rather curious from the point of view that Madame Blavatsky was the writer of those famous letters. You have known me in this hall for sixteen and a half years. You have never known me lie to you. My worst public enemy, through the whole of my life, never cast a slur upon my

integrity. Everything else they have sullied, but my truth never; and I tell you that since Madame Blavatsky left, I have had letters in the same writing and from the same person. Unless you think that dead persons write —and I do not think so—that is rather a curious fact against the whole challenge of fraud. I do not ask you to believe me, but I tell you this on the faith of a record that has never yet been sullied by a conscious lie.'

For more than a month *The Daily Chronicle* printed leading articles, interviews, and letters on the subject, from one to six columns daily, sometimes quoting in one issue from as many as thirty letters. On September 1st appeared an interview in which she was asked: 'Has the death of Madame Blavatsky affected the connections existing between your T.S. colony and the Mahatmas?' She replied: 'A large number of men and women were pupils of Madame Blavatsky, and those came into relations with the Mahatmas, which relations are not altered by her departure. I myself came into direct communication with the Mahatmas nearly a year ago; so that I am able to say I have first-hand evidence of their existence.' She added that there were Mahatmas (Masters) all over the world and belonging to all nations, but that the largest group was 'resident at present in Tibet, and it is with the Mahatmas there that the T.S. is connected'.* The circulation of the paper is said to have risen tremendously as a result of these articles and letters, and this and Mrs Besant's numerous crowded lectures give evidence of the considerable, if temporary, interest in this subject of what some one called postal

* A few days later she added the interesting information that the Masters had assisted the British during the Indian Mutiny, judging British rule to be best for India at that time. The Russo-Japanese War, it might be mentioned here, was brought about by occult influence, as a set-back to the European domination of Asia. Incidentally, Bismarck was an occultist, and defeated the French in 1870 partly because able in astral form to visit all parts of the battle-front; which hardly seems playing the game.

communication with the other world. One correspondent suggested that Mrs Besant was under the hypnotic influence of the General Secretary of the American Section, W. Q. Judge. In fact, a year or two later she herself came to the conclusion that the letters referred to in the lecture were forged by Judge—which, but for her other personal experiences, would rather have taken the wind out of her sails.

On September 3rd *The Daily Chronicle* quoted comments by G. W. Foote in which, declaring her a mischievous enemy, he stated his conviction 'either that Mrs Besant is the victim of hallucination or of a practical joker, or else that the statement of her receiving the letters that used to come from the Mahatmas to Madame Blavatsky is a deliberate bid for the Theosophic leadership'. He would have felt quite certain of his second hypothesis could he but have taken a glimpse behind the Society's scenes at this time. What followed the death of Madame Blavatsky has for the impartial onlooker all the appearance of a vigorous if formal fight for the apostolic succession and the control of the Society either directly or by means of the Esoteric Section. With the latter Olcott was not concerned—he was never a member—and exoterically his position as President-Founder was practically unassailable. Once the first confusion had died down it was seen that the only serious claimants were Mrs Besant and Judge. Her position was perhaps the stronger. She had been the favourite disciple, was the holder of many important Inner Group offices, and the one English Theosophist with a wide public reputation. Her compelling personality, her superhuman energy, her incessant labours all told to her advantage. She was assured both Press publicity and the largest audiences at her lectures. Under her influence Theosophical work seemed to be gathering force everywhere. In her own sphere she stood unrivalled. But on the

other hand she had been a Theosophist scarcely two full years, while Judge was not merely Vice-President but one of the original members.

After Madame Blavatsky's death Mrs Besant, as related, was the first on the scene, but Judge came by the next boat, and the Colonel made what haste he could from Sydney.* Thus met a new Octavius, Antony, and Lepidus to divide the world between them. A compromise was arranged only on the interference of the Masters—a letter later alleged to be a forgery by Judge. The Colonel, that inadequate if not unmeritable man, meet to be sent on messages, naturally retained the Presidency and full external control; the other two shared the spoils of the Esoteric Section, Mrs Besant taking the Eastern Division (Europe and India), Judge the Western (America).

But it was a forced settlement, and if Judge was satisfied it seems that the other two were not. Influences —emanating from India—soon became apparent working against him. It may have been that Olcott resented the power of the Esoteric Section, and felt that could Judge but be eliminated he would have little difficulty in managing a woman—he *was* that type of man; but to attempt an elucidation of the Society's domestic politics at this or any other time is an impossible task which would win no one's gratitude. Certainly the opposition seems to have been primarily between Olcott and Judge, with Mrs Besant as the fulcrum by which each sought to swing the power into his own hands.

For some while ('deceived') she favoured Judge, and accepted without question the messages he gave her from the Masters. In 1891 she was to have visited India for the Annual Convention, but Judge, according to one account, brought charges of grave immorality

* He had received instantaneous telepathic news of his co-Founder's death, but cautiously waited for telegraphic confirmation.

against the Colonel, and, pleading ill-health and lack of funds, she went to America to confer with the former. Olcott was threatened with an inquiry; he resigned, but hastily withdrew his resignation. According to another account making no mention of these interesting details, Judge forged an occult message which declared that, should she go to Adyar, Olcott would poison her. Again in 1892 he kept her from joining the Colonel, and again she wrote to Adyar offering vague hopes for the next year. In her letter she declared that, even in England, India and the Indians were nearer to her than her fellow-countrymen. 'In heart I am one with you, and to you by my past I belong. Born last time under Western skies for work that needs to be done, I do not forget my true motherland, and my true nature turns eastward ever with filial longing. When Karma opens the door, I will walk through it, and we will meet in the body as we can already meet in mind.' *

Once more she undertook instead a three months' lecturing tour in America. 'Her mission before the public was an overwhelming success, while among the Theosophists themselves her progress was a continuous ovation. She visited, with the exception of the south, every large centre in the United States, east and west. The largest halls and theatres were packed to capacity with attentive and respectful audiences. The Press throughout the country was filled with interviews and articles descriptive of her remarkable history, her oratorical ability, her personal characteristics, her pre-eminence in the Theosophical world, her presumed occult attainments and powers. A great outburst of curiosity and interest in her and her doctrines preceded and followed her wherever she went.' † *The New York World* ‡ described her as 'a woman of marked intellectuality and

* *Theosophist*, December 1892. † *Theosophical Movement.*
‡ February 26th 1893.

charmingly womanly in her exhibition of it. Her entire personality has the equipoise of the philosopher, touched here and there at times by the disciplined fervour of the student rather than the effusiveness of the enthusiast. Her mild expressive face, when in repose . . . is that of the mystic; the light on her mild brown eyes "never was on land or sea", and her pleasant equable voice carries with it the timbre of placidity.'

A week or two later appeared an account by 'one who knows her' of her daily life and methods.* 'Decidedly regular in her habits, firm in this as in everything,' she was at breakfast every morning when at home punctually at eight with 'her little flock', having already read her letters and scanned the newspapers. At eight-forty-five she retired to her writing-room, where after dealing with correspondence she turned to literary work, 'a score of subjects being in hand'. 'In writing, she first gets a grasp of what she has to say—not the words but the idea; then the words come as the pen flies over the paper. She writes very quickly, folio after folio, and rarely has to alter twenty words in as many thousands.† She has a wonderful flow and control of language as all know who have heard her lecture'—but no 'small talk'. From one to one-thirty came lunch and a brief rest 'in the quiet presence of the family circle'. Then work until seven, with interruptions for the reception of visitors. 'Dinner means a couple of hours' rest, after which another couple of hours are devoted once more to work.' She was a rigid teetotaler and vegetarian. On certain nights Society meetings were held. At this time she was delivering between two and three hundred lectures a year, sometimes three in one day. 'She never

* *Weekly Star*, March 11th 1893.

† A dexterity apt, as far as actual expression goes, to make for quantity rather than quality. Had she only written less, it is possible that many of her works now so irrevocably dead and forgotten might still be living and effective.

writes out or prepares the wording of her lectures. Obtaining a thorough grasp of the subject in all its bearings, and such a grasp that will withstand the fire of an open discussion by the meeting afterwards, is the only preparation she relies on, and it is the safe one. A sort of instinct makes her feel, as she looks upon her audience, the best way of setting out her points and conclusions. . . . Once on a time she did write out perorations with the view to making her conclusion effective, but when the time for it came she always failed to deliver it with any effect. Sometimes now, if the subject is a knotty and difficult one, she will arrange the order in which the premises will best go, and writes them on a slip of paper about the size of the palm of her hand. Otherwise her general rule is simply to be alone for about half an hour or an hour before the lecture, and so wake up the atmosphere of her subject as it were, and thoroughly saturate herself with it. She has a splendid memory, due, she thinks, to reading and doing everything with very close attention.'

She was, at this period, in the plenitude of her powers.

4

It was in the autumn of 1893 that the tide began to flow against Judge. To explain this his adherents point to the influence of a mysterious Brahmin—Gyanendra Nath Chakravarti—who for a number of years henceforward hovers mysteriously in the background of Theosophical history. He was a member of the Society but not of the Esoteric Section, being, on the contrary, a ' chela of one of the numerous Yoga systems in India ' ; nevertheless prominent Theosophists believed him to be ' if not a Mahatma, at least an occultist of high rank and in direct communication with the Masters of

H. P. B.' * The year 1893 was that of the Chicago Parliament of Religions, at which, but with difficulty, a place was secured for Theosophy. Chakravarti was one of the selected representatives, and in June he sailed for England. 'He met all the leading Theosophists in Britain and was intensely active among them during his entire stay. His coming had been anticipated with the utmost interest, as may be imagined, and his suavity, his versatility, and great knowledge, added to the lure of oriental mystery with which he was surrounded, gave him a vogue that rose to veneration on the part of the "household" at Avenue Road.' †

After two months, accompanied by Mrs Besant and others, he proceeded to America; they were joined by Judge, and at Chicago scored 'by all odds the most notable and noteworthy success of the proceedings, and in this success Professor Chakravarti and Mrs Besant held the leading place'.‡ From this time forward her attitude to Judge changed as—it is alleged—she fell more and more under the spell of Chakravarti's charm. He possessed psychic gifts which for all her reputation as an occultist and ascetic she lacked, and she became, in a sense, his pupil.§

From Chicago she returned to London, and a week or two later was on her way to India with Countess Wachtmeister, Chakravarti having sailed on the previous boat. While at sea Mrs Besant informed the worshipping Countess that 'Master had told her directly that the communications received by her from W. Q. Judge and purporting to come direct from the Master were not genuine'. That Christmas 'the order to take action

* *Theosophical Movement.* † *Ibid.* ‡ *Ibid.*

§ Whatever the truth of these allegations, it is noteworthy that since her conversion to Theosophy she has always been intimately connected with one or another person whose 'psychic sensitiveness' was more firmly established than hers: first Madame Blavatsky, then Judge, then Chakravarti, and finally Leadbeater. And as Chakravarti 'came', so Judge 'went'.

was repeated to me at Adyar . . . and I was bidden to wash away the stains on the Theosophical Society. "Take up the heavy Karma of the Society. Your strength was given you for this".' * As the result of this and of many conferences with Olcott she returned to London in March as Judge's accuser, her main charge being that of 'forging the names and handwritings of the Masters and misusing the said names and handwritings' to advance his own reputation and authority. In July 1894 an inquiry was held in London, the three leaders being present, but a decision was declared to be impossible because obviously it involved a question of the real existence or otherwise of the Masters, and as to that the Society as such could not commit itself. Here was deadlock. At once Mrs Besant embarked on what one cannot but regard as a bold attempt to bolster up her and Olcott's position. While her followers in England were carrying on a vigorous campaign on her behalf, she sailed for Australia with practically presidential powers. Upon her return to Adyar that December she announced: 'Last year only India would have stood against Mr Judge, America and Europe going with him, two sections to one, or the majority of the Theosophical Society. But by my Australian visit a new section has been built up, and this stands with India and Europe in demanding Mr Judge's resignation. . . . That is, we have three sections to one.' † These were, at any rate, bold tactics, whatever else one may think of them.

But meanwhile a British Theosophist, Walter R. Old, deeming the situation as it stood impossible, had cut the Gordian knot by placing a number of private papers in the hands of a London journalist. The consequence was *Isis Very Much Unveiled*, a withering attack upon the Society in *The Westminster Gazette* in October 1894. Here the accusations against Judge were repeated

* *Theosophical Movement.* † *Case Against Judge.*

publicly. In November, Judge himself, perhaps discerning Mrs Besant's hand in this, attempted to assume full control of the Esoteric Section, dismissing her from her Eastern Headship. He declared her under the influence of Dark Powers of Evil, and indicted Chakravarti similarly as being no longer a follower of the White Brotherhood. Naturally, Mrs Besant rejected his authority, and at the Adyar Convention that December his resignation of the Vice-Presidency was demanded, and a campaign launched to secure his expulsion. The direct result of this ably-conducted policy of squeezing-out was that the American Section at its next Convention (April 1895) proclaimed its loyalty to him, and seventy-five of a hundred and one branches seceded to form the Theosophical Society in America, with Judge as President for life. His rule was short, for he died early in 1896. Then again followed a fight for the succession, and again a woman, holding the coats while the male rivals battled and schemed, bolted with the spoils. To-day Mrs Katherine Tingley still presides over her sadly diminished followers amid the beautiful Greek Theatres and Peace Temples overlooking the Pacific at Point Loma, California. At the time of the secession fourteen branches declared loyally for the parent body, and were chartered by Olcott under a new general secretary as the authorized American Section. This boasts now a membership of some 7,000, while that of all the various other American offshoots numbers scarcely 1,000.

Perhaps after all Olcott did achieve his purpose—if it *was* his purpose—in eliminating Judge. Certainly for a decade after the events of 1895 there was peace, no vital new development being attempted until well after his death in 1907. The Society's diary for the period is largely a record of Olcott's triumphal progresses in every continent. He reigned over the organization unchal-

lenged, and was happy in the homage paid to him as the surviving Founder. He had able lieutenants, but there was no attempt at usurpation, and (at any rate until 1905) no shadow of dispute or scandal came to disturb the Society's steady growth. He accepted Mrs Besant as his successor, and she served him well. With Judge's secession she became sole Head of the Esoteric Section, and during these years it was rather to occult study than to exterior organization that she gave her attention. Her public work, apart from lecturing in India—her home was now at Benares—and abroad, was mainly in the field of Indian education and social reform, and must be dealt with separately. Between 1895 and 1907 she produced some seventy books and pamphlets, mainly on Theosophical subjects and some of considerable bulk; the most important are, perhaps, *The Ancient Wisdom* (1897), *Esoteric Christianity* (1901) and *A Study in Consciousness* (1904). By pen and voice she became in these years beyond doubt the outstanding personality among the Society's leaders. Her fame, her reputed possession of occult powers, the intellectual background of metaphysical speculation which she added, thus making Theosophy more acceptable to many minds, her ability to work continuously under extreme pressure, her countless lectures, her bombardments of pamphlets and textbooks and articles, her confidence in herself and in whatever position she adopted, the conviction she not only felt but so impressively conveyed, her powers as an orator—all these combined to make her predominant. Olcott was the head of the Society ; she became, more and more, its heart, and through her more and more its genuine life-blood flowed. As early as 1900 he noted, and one feels resented, a tendency to ' idolize ' her, as previously Madame Blavatsky. After the turn of the century, had he ventured to challenge her, one can scarcely doubt her victory.

For ten years President Olcott reigned in peace. When the Leadbeater trouble arose in 1905 he was an old man, eighty-four years of age, and though the case may at one point have seemed settled by Leadbeater's resignation it had already tried his strength sorely, and he sank into a long illness which ended in his death at Adyar on February 17th 1907. 'This morning came from their far-off Ashramas in the snowy Himalayas, his own Master, wearing the Rajput form, with that other gentlest One in form of Kashmiri Brahmana, and yet one other, Egyptian-born, who had had him also in charge, and They, with their dearest friend, H. P. B., came to fetch him to rest with Them in Their home, far north. His own Guru-deva snapped the cord that bound the man to his cast-off garment, and, sleeping in His Master's arms, as it were, he passed from earth.' *

In January he had issued a statement that 'the two Masters, who had since the Society's commencement been closely identified with it, appeared to him', and named Mrs Besant as his successor; therefore he appointed her, and during his illness, on February 11th, 'in his deeper unconsciousness, a watcher heard him murmuring: "I bless Annie, I bless Annie", as though his thoughts clustered lovingly round the one to whom he had bequeathed his sacred work'.† Subsequently a number of manifestations took place at Adyar, various Masters visiting the Headquarters and 'impressing' Mrs Besant to be President. Many members took exception to these unconstitutional proceedings (her attitude to Leadbeater was also a cause of dispute), but she was elected President by a large majority in July 1907. She became thus more completely Head of the Society than either Madame Blavatsky or Olcott. For she was Head now of both exoteric and esoteric organizations.

* *Last Days of the President-Founder.* † *Ibid.*

The immediate effect upon the Society was two-fold. In her Presidential Address * she declared her devotion to the will of the Masters, and her intention to preserve the Society as ' the chosen vehicle for the direct influence of the Masters of Wisdom on the world, as the standard-bearer of the mighty Theosophical Movement which is sweeping through all religions, all literature, all art, all craft, through all the activities of a humanity preparing itself to take a new step forward in civilization '. On the other hand, she was determined to uphold toleration and liberty of thought ' as the inherent right of the intellect, as its breath of life ', but no one was to suppose ' that this perfect freedom of opinion connotes indifference to truth in any who hold definite convictions as to any facts, or should prevent them from full expression of their own convictions, of their beliefs, or of their knowledge. There is perfect freedom of affirmation among us as well as of denial, and scepticism must not claim greater rights of expression than knowledge. . . . The Society would be without a reason for its being if it did not, as a whole, spread the Teachings which lead up to the attainment of that Wisdom.' The Society ' does not impose on its members even the truth by which it lives, although the denial of those truths by it, as a Society, would be suicide '.

She sought also to impose a more business-like organization of activities. Looking internally, her first care was to put the Society as a whole upon a sound financial basis, with strict and regular auditing of accounts ; later she established a printing-press at Adyar, and regularly enlarged and improved the property generally and the Oriental Library. Looking out into the world, she sought to waken members to a wider and more intensive propaganda : ' Our Lodges should not be content with a programme of lectures, private and public, and with

* *Last Days of the President-Founder.*

classes. The members should be known as good workers in all branches of beneficent activity. The Lodge should be the centre, not the circumference, of our work. To the Lodge for inspiration and knowledge; to the world for service and teaching. . . . There are many other lines of useful work which should be taken up, series of books to be planned, concerted activities in different lands. These are for the future. But I trust to make the Presidency a centre of life-radiating force, inspiring and uplifting the whole Society.'

5

As the decade preceding Mrs Besant's Presidential election was on the whole, save for the notable incident towards its close, a peaceful one, so the two following have, in a sense, been mainly periods of growth and consolidation. The record of the past twenty years occupies in the Society's official history a few pages only, and of those a large proportion are devoted to comparatively extraneous matters. Occasional quarrels, expulsions, and secessions there were, but no trouble in any way comparable to the Judge crisis of 1895. In this story of steady progress Mrs Besant has played more than her part.*

She was in England at the time of her election, but soon she left for America, spent August and September there, in October visited Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Italy, and by the end of November was at

* A minor activity was the introduction of Co-Masonry into India. She herself was initiated early in 1890, but it was in 1903 that 'the Very Illustrious Sister, Mrs Annie Besant, started the Co-Masonry movement on Indian soil, for the first time in the history of Modern Free-Masonry'. In 1911 she took part in a Suffragist procession in London, wearing the regalia of a 33° mason as Vice-President and Grand Master of the Supreme Council of the Co-Masonic Order.

THE PRESIDENT

Adyar. Five months of the following year (May to September) were occupied in a tour of Australasia. In 1909 she visited many parts of India, Europe, and America (where in a stay of sixty-three days she delivered forty-eight public and fifty private lectures), between January and November travelling nearly 45,000 miles. Everywhere she visited sections of the Society, gave public lectures, won many new recruits to the cause, wakened old members to fresh endeavours, and strengthened the bonds between herself and them ; everywhere she left behind a stir of activity. The year 1910 she spent wholly in India, and, as if inevitably, the Adyar property extended both south and west, new buildings of every kind being added—accommodation for visiting and resident students, printing-shops, power-houses, dairies, laundries. Her quickly resumed travels between India and Europe were interrupted by the War and by her work for Indian Home Rule, and if they have never been so regular since, owing to ill-health and to pressure of other work, her world tours of the last year or two have shown that her abstinence was not due to any inherent inability. Mrs Besant has done well by the Society, and the Society has acknowledged its debt by re-electing her President in 1914, 1923, and again in 1928, and still more by following faithfully wherever she has led.

Yet while the growth and consolidation is admitted, it might be added not unfairly that this peace in the house largely seems to have been preserved by having the fights in the back garden—that back garden which, as I have tried to show, must be reckoned essentially part of the Theosophical premises.

Her first election, overwhelming as had been the voting in her favour, had taken place under stormy conditions, partly owing to the fact and circumstances of the ' Adyar manifestations ', to which a number of mem-

bers objected, but due still more to her connection with, and supposed belief in the pure life of, C. W. Leadbeater, who thus far has received only incidental mention in these pages. It is time to introduce more adequately this interesting personality. There are current two opinions concerning him. The first discerns in him 'the greatest seer of our own, and probably of any previous, era, a man of selfless life'.* The other, alas, is less flattering.

Charles Webster Leadbeater was born in February 1847, some nine months before Annie Wood; he was educated in South America and at Oxford, and as a young man lost a fortune and found consolation—and employment—in the Church. He was a curate in a Hampshire parish, still wearing clerical costume, when at Sinnett's proposal he joined the London Lodge in 1883. Like Mrs Besant, he was first attracted to Theosophy by Sinnett's books. From the first he was a frequent and deeply interested visitor; he decided to devote his life to the cause, and in November 1884 joined Madame Blavatsky in India. After a few months at Adyar, Olcott sent him to Ceylon, where he became 'a follower of the Lord Buddha'. In 1889 Sinnett, still in London, offered the post of tutor to his son to Leadbeater, who accepted delightedly, declaring himself sick of Ceylon, but adding that the Masters had given into his care a certain native boy—C. Jinarajadasa, later Vice-President of the Society—who would have to accompany him. Naturally Sinnett could not oppose the Masters' wishes. Originally, it is said, Leadbeater possessed no occult powers, but these developed, and by 1893 he was not only Secretary of the London Lodge but, psychically speaking, its bright particular star. His powers continued to grow, and his fame spread, though by some Theosophists—Rudolf Steiner among others—his system

* A. J. Willson in *Dr Annie Besant: Fifty Years in Public Work.*

of Occultism was opposed as inducing mental aberration and moral irresponsibility. When Mrs Besant, after a period of coolness towards Sinnett, joined the London Lodge also about 1893, she was attracted immediately by Leadbeater's ' wonderful clairvoyant faculties ', and induced him to leave Sinnett for her own wealthier Blavatsky Lodge. She received many messages through him, and in 1895 they carried out together the first of a series of clairvoyant investigations into thought-forms and occult chemistry and the history of mankind, the results of which have been published in several volumes.

He became in due course a prominent Theosophical writer and lecturer, and frequently visited America, where he acted as tutor to a number of boys, the children of fellow-Theosophists. It was in 1905, and in connection with these boys, that charges of an unpleasant nature were brought against him. No public accusation was made, but members of the Society demanded an inquiry. Olcott journeyed to London, and a committee meeting was held early in 1906 at which Leadbeater was said to have made certain admissions ; his resignation was accepted. Immediately a protest was organized by Jinarajadasa, his protégé, then attached to the American Section as a lecturer, on the ground that this action infringed the Society's principles of individual liberty. Mrs Besant supported this, for though she sought to attribute to ' glamour ' her experiences with Leadbeater upon the astral plane, she felt his passing into exile as an incalculable loss, the more so because Chakravarti—discovered to be under the influences of the Dark Powers —had by this time vanished into that commodious limbo reserved for discredited Theosophical leaders.

Then came Olcott's death, and as prospective President her attitude was a matter of first importance. It was known that Olcott on his death-bed had written to Leadbeater that the Masters had made it clear to him

that there could be no question of glamour in connection with his work, and that if he would renounce certain teachings the path of reconciliation to the Society might be opened ; but this was a possibility which many members did not welcome. In April 1907 the British Section telegraphed to Mrs Besant : ' Would you as President permit Leadbeater's readmission ? ' and though she seems by this time to have come to Olcott's opinion as to the glamour,* she replied cautiously : ' If publicly repudiates teaching, two years after repudiation on large majority request of whole Society would reinstate ; otherwise not.' This sounded definite enough, and two months later she still believed that ' any proposal to reinstate Mr Leadbeater in the membership of the Theosophical Society would be ruinous to the Society ', and reasserted her rejection of any such application. But time—even fifteen months—works wonders, and in 1908 she came to the conclusion that she had wronged him in believing him to have admitted charges he still denied. That autumn she induced the General Council to review the evidence, with the result that it was declared that there was no reason why he should not return to the Society. A number of members protested, a number—among them Sinnett and G. R. S. Mead—resigned, and many more regarded the situation with considerable misgiving. The point of view of some, as expressed a little later by an honorary member (Edouard Schuré) of the French Section, has at least the interest of melodrama. He charged Mrs Besant with reinstating Leadbeater solely because she needed his aid

* It was, apparently, between Olcott's death and her election that, as she revealed in 1925, she passed with Leadbeater (' together because of our future work together ') the great Arhat Initiation—corresponding, I am told, to the Crucifixion—thus qualifying for Apostleship when the World Teacher should come. Surely after returning to so intimate and important a connection, and seeing him thus accepted ' by the King as among His Arhats ', she must have known her own mind about him.

in her occult investigations. ' From that time onwards, it is clearly manifest that Mrs Besant has fallen under the formidable suggestive power of her dangerous collaborator, and can only see, think, and act under his absolute control. The personality henceforward speaking through her is no more the author of *The Ancient Wisdom*, but the questionable visionary, the skilful master of suggestion, who no longer dares to show himself in London, Paris, or America, but in the obscurity of a summer-house at Adyar governs the Theosophical Society through its President.' The summer-house, even if it existed only in the imagination, was the concrete touch of an artist—more of an artist, indeed, than Leadbeater shows signs of being: his works, even his occult works, are less interesting to the uninitiated than might be expected; from the literary point of view he makes nothing of his opportunities, living completely up to his reputation as an ' occult policeman ', who reports an occurrence of countless centuries ago and world-shattering significance in the spirit and manner of a constable on duty reporting a bus collision in the Strand. Yet Keyserling, after personal contact with him at Adyar in 1911, found it scarcely open to doubt that Leadbeater felt at home in occult spheres, and thought it probable that he actually saw what he described. Though he did not enjoy general appreciation even among Theosophists, his writings, despite a frequency of childish traits, were more instructive than most of their kind. ' He is the only one whom I know, whose power of observation is more or less on the level of a scientist, and he is the only one whose descriptions are plain and simple.' Intellectually he appeared neither specially talented nor equal to his material, but he seemed honest, and his assertions corresponded to philosophical truths. ' What he sees after his own fashion (very often without understanding it) is in the highest degree full of signifi-

cance. He will, therefore, in all probability have seen something which really exists.' * A further note from the same source is interesting: 'Pious souls are often estranged by the incontrovertible moral failings of an admired "saint"; the unusual faculties of such are all too often not the normal expression of a higher level of existence, but the accidental product of the diseased transference of an average psychic equilibrium.'

6

Whatever the truth of all these matters, it seems clear at least that Mrs Besant needed Leadbeater at Adyar, for stirring events were at hand. On the last day of 1908 she made in a lecture in Madras the first public announcement of the near coming of a great World Teacher. This she repeated and amplified in the course of a series of addresses delivered in London in the following summer and printed in *The Changing World*. They were striking addresses in her best manner, and made a great temporary impression, bringing many new members to the Society in England. She depicted the present as the close of an age; asserted that the West had arrived at a deadlock with regard to religion, science, art, and social reform, that an altogether new way forward must be sought in the development of altogether new faculties, and that the remedy for social evils was to be found in making brotherhood a reality instead of merely an ideal; asserted, moreover, that these things must come to pass, that the world was approaching the dawn of a new era, that the birth of its own especial sub-race was already in process, that a new civilization must ultimately ensue,

* *Travel Diary of a Philosopher*, vol. I, pp. 119–120. Before taking these statements too literally, it seems to me necessary that the intention and spirit of the writer should be appreciated.

and that as a beginning—as in previous eras under analogous conditions—a World Teacher would come to point and illuminate the way. She declared also, for the first time publicly, that the two Masters who were to shepherd the new civilization into existence were the true founders of the Theosophical Society, and that the real, the 'inner purpose of the Society was to prepare the world for the coming of a new Race, and to be itself the nucleus of that Race; that one of the Teachers was to be the Manu of the Race, the other the Bodhisattva'.

These facts had never been stated in print, but in early years were passed verbally from member to member. After the troubles of 1884 and 1885, and the temporary concentration upon lower purposes, they tended to be forgotten by the majority. Mrs Besant herself had been a Theosophist for six years when her own Master—in 1895, the year of her first collaboration with Leadbeater, be it noted—confided these matters to her. Since then, apparently, preparations for the Coming had gone on more or less in secret, until with her election in 1907 a new era dawned for the Society as well as for the world, 'because Mrs Besant was different from the President-Founder in having a conscious link with her Master'. Some of the Masters returned to their old places as the First Section, the approaching of the hour (still estimated as thirty or forty years hence) was indicated by the reincarnation of numerous deceased Theosophical stalwarts of early days, and 'hence the need, because the time is passing rapidly, to make public what has been kept private in the past of this inner purpose, which has really dominated the Society from within, although not recognized without'.

Already, when these lectures were delivered, the 'vehicle of the World Teacher' had been chosen—at least provisionally. No sooner had Leadbeater arrived once more at Adyar, in February 1909, than his attention

was attracted by two boys—J. Krishnamurti, then not quite fourteen, and his brother Nityananda, three years younger—sons of a Madrasi Brahmin recently employed in a humble capacity at Adyar. He began thereupon a study of the elder boy's past existences, and was unavoidably struck not only by his distinguished destiny but also by the remarkable manner in which it was entangled with that of himself, Mrs Besant, and other eminent Theosophists. The result of these investigations has been published in two bulky volumes; from the purely historical point of view they are, considering Leadbeater's opportunities, singularly dull. But at least they made it clear—for Theosophists—that this was no ordinary youth, and in December they became Leadbeater's pupils. Events now moved swiftly and on January 11th 1910, scarcely a month later, was celebrated the 'initiation' of Alcyone—a name used to indicate the immortal personality, so to speak, of Krishnamurti—'the occult "birth of the young child", who in due time shall become the vehicle for the blessing of the world'. When the father objected to Leadbeater himself taking charge of the boys, Mrs Besant pressed the matter and in March adopted them herself. It amounted to much the same, for they remained still in their tutor's care.

This idea of the possession by a Master of a more or less adult 'vehicle', even in modern times, was not new to Theosophists, for in 1897 Mrs Besant had frankly affirmed in an interview that '"Madame Blavatsky has been reincarnated in the person of a young Brahmin, now about nineteen years old, whose soul had departed". The reincarnation took place five years ago, and the lad, who previously knew only Sanskrit and Hindustani, now speaks Russian, French, German, and Hebrew; but, she says "his identity must be held secret for some time to come. I knew from Madame Blavatsky of this rein-

carnation before it was consummated. There can be no doubt of it, and the fact can be established without difficulty, when the right time comes." ' * In 1909, in *The Changing World*, Madame Blavatsky's return was again mentioned and affirmed. But the coming to the body of Alcyone of ' the greatest messenger of the Great White Lodge ' was a different matter, neither so easily nor so immediately to be arranged and achieved.

Nevertheless preparations went on apace. The Order of the Rising Sun of India was founded in Benares on January 11th 1911 by G. S. Arundale, head master at the Central Hindu College. A few months later it was organized on a world-wide basis as the Order of the Star in the East, with Krishnamurti as its Head and Mrs Besant as Protector. It existed primarily to prepare for the Coming, and it had, like the Esoteric Section, no official connection with the Society, though in practice it was not less closely associated. Like the Society, too, it offered a formal freedom of opinion. ' The member of the Order,' Mrs Besant stated, ' is left free to recognize greatness for himself; no one dictates to him whom he shall reverence. If any member claimed to force upon others *his* own object of reverence, then opposition to such claims would be reasonable.' Yet she never made any secret of her own belief that Krishnamurti was the chosen vehicle; indeed of later years she has stated openly that her certainty rests not on belief but on knowledge, and her dread penalty for non-recognition of the Teacher leaves little alternative to acquiescence save for the strong-minded or obstinate: ' Reject Him again when He comes if you will, and then let your civilization go down as others which have gone before.' †

Certainly the incident which occurred at the Benares Convention upon December 28th 1911 can have left little doubt or open choice among members of the Order.

* *Theosophist*, May 1897. † *How a World Teacher Comes.*

That summer Mrs Besant brought the brothers to England for a brief visit, but the party returned in October and attended the Convention. Upon this memorable day, according to her account, Dr Arundale lectured on the Order, and the casual suggestion was made that new members might like to receive their certificates from Alcyone himself. A simple ceremony was arranged for the evening. Mrs Besant spoke a few words, then the young Head of the Order stepped forward. But 'suddenly the whole atmosphere changed, and great vibrations thrilled through the hall, the slender boyish figure took on a surprising majesty, the line of approaching members was struck by a common impulse, and one after another, old and young, men and women, Indians, Europeans, and Americans, as they reached him, stretched out quivering hands to take their papers, and bowed their heads at his feet to receive his blessing, while he, serene and with an exquisite smile of welcome to each, bent with hands outstretched in benediction, as simply and naturally as though naught extraordinary was happening'. Another account describes coronets of blue light enclosing a 'Rosy Cross', and a 'dazzling flashing Star' blazing down from the roof above. 'What,' asked Mrs Besant, 'shall be the end of a mission thus begun and thus consecrated?' *

Krishnamurti was now sixteen years old, and, with his brother, still in Leadbeater's care. Their father—he has one's sympathies—objected to their participation in such unusual proceedings, and early in 1912 demanded that they should return to him. At the same time he brought serious charges against Leadbeater. Again Mrs Besant took the boys to Europe, and in October, immediately upon her return, a plaint was lodged for the recovery of the brothers, who had been left behind in England 'to prosecute their studies for the university'.

* *Theosophist*, February 1912.

The case was heard in March and April 1913; it was a distasteful one, old accusations against Leadbeater, recalled from 1906, being repeated in the fullest possible detail. The judge's summing-up was not at all favourable to the father, but it was held that he could not legally divest himself of his right to the custody of the boys. Their return was ordered, but at the same time they were made wards of the court * and full costs were granted against him. Mrs Besant lodged an appeal, and in October the High Court of Madras upheld the judgment, but made each party responsible for its own costs. Again she appealed, this time to the Privy Council, and upon May 25th 1914 the original judgment was quashed, she was given all costs against the father—a claim she did not press—and her guardianship of the vehicle of the World Teacher was made secure. It is not uninteresting to speculate as to the consequences had she lost her case completely.

The matter attracted much attention to the Society in India, and curiously enough resulted in a considerable addition to the membership there.† The whole affair of the Coming seems to have had the same effect, despite protests and resignations on the part of some members and groups—the most notable loss to the Society being Rudolf Steiner and the fifty-five German Lodges (some 2,500 members) which went with him into exile. Throughout the greater part of the Society increased

* A few days later, however, the judge changed his mind and made the father the guardian.

† The membership figures of the Society as a whole are interesting. In the 32 years of Olcott's Presidency there joined 32,000 members, in the first 18 years of Mrs Besant's 84,000; in all 116,000. But the present membership is in the neighbourhood of 44,000. Again, since the war, the annual *new membership* has only once been less than 5,000 (and once over 7,000), and yet the actual total *increase* from 1919 to 1925 is under 8,000! Theosophists admit this transitory nature of their membership, but urge—what seems reasonable—that the majority even of those who drop out remain open to Theosophical ideas, which thus permeate a continually widening area.

tension, enthusiasm, and activity of preparation followed during the next decade and more, for it was not until 1925 that the long-expected event took place, even momentarily. In the meantime Mrs Besant continued not less but rather more ardently her constant work in other fields.*

* It will be as well to summarize briefly here Leadbeater's later career. Having played his part he seems to have passed somewhat out of the main stream of activity. He continued to reside at Adyar until 1914, when he visited Australia. Thenceforward he made Sydney his permanent headquarters, and took up work in connection with founding a new sub-race. The result was a rapid development of Theosophy in Australia. In 1916, during a Christian Reform Movement there, the Liberal Catholic Church (deriving from ' the Old Catholic Church of Holland ') was established at the suggestion of the World Teacher himself, and the former Hampshire curate and follower of the Lord Buddha was now (July 1916) consecrated as Bishop for Australasia by James I. Wedgwood, himself a Bishop of some five months' standing. To-day the Theosophical Society looks to Mrs Besant and to Leadbeater as its two leaders, as in the old days it looked to Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott.

VI

THE CALL TO INDIA

I

BY ANY RECKONING the Theosophical must be declared the most important of all influences in Mrs Besant's life, if only because it brought her to India, the scene during the last thirty-five years of some of her most enduring labours. India was, of course, the Headquarters of the Society and the home of the Masters, but to these simpler statements we must add that in becoming a Theosophist she acquired not only an unexpected future but also an unsuspected past. At least twice before, she discovered, she had been martyred in the West in the bodies of Giordano Bruno and the lovely Hypatia of Alexandria, but her memories penetrated between and beyond and she realized that she was one of those who, 'though born for this life in a Western land and clad in a Western body, can yet look back to earlier incarnations in which they drank the milk of spiritual wisdom from the breast of their true mother', and who 'must feel ever the magic of her immemorial past, must dwell ever under the spell of her deathless fascination, for they are bound to India by all the sacred memories of their past'.

Nevertheless it is very easy to make too much of the connection between Theosophy and her Indian social and political labours. For Mrs Besant herself it is as close as it could be; as a Theosophist she sees all her earlier life as merely preparation for the work her Masters were to set before her in India, and she avows that in every sphere of action she works under their direct guidance. The separation she makes is merely a matter of policy: she does not desire to alienate from her Indian work those

who are not Theosophists, nor from Theosophy those who cannot accept her Indian ideals. Yet is it not possible to see the division as a very real one ? Theosophy brought her to India—can we say more than that ? It may have shaped this or that minor aspect of her work there, even more than India itself it may have brought her to profess Hinduism ; but it seems clear that had she gone instead to China, Canada, or Peru her interest in religion, education, social reform, and politics would have been just as ardent, and that, once in India, she only continued—necessarily on new lines in a new environment—the work for reform and general enlightenment which in England had become part of her daily life.

It was on November 16th 1893 that she landed for the first time—in this life—on the sacred soil of what she now regarded as ' in very truth the Holy Land '. She had paused in her outward journey from London to spend a few days in Ceylon, and crossed from Colombo to Tuticorin in the extreme south. Theosophical accounts are naturally apt to exaggerate, but in one by no means friendly to her we read that ' in all the annals of the Theosophical Society there is nothing comparable to this Indian visit of Mrs Besant's. From the first moment of her landing hers was a vice-regal progress and a triumph. Natives and Europeans, members and non-members of the Society, crowded her with attentions. The pages of the *Theosophist* during the months of her presence in India were burdened with descriptions and laudations devoted to the *avatara* " Annabai ", as she was christened by the enthusiastic Hindus. During her trip she visited the sacred places of India, held conferences with leading priests, proclaimed herself an Indian in heart and feeling '.* Colonel Olcott described her four months' tour, which covered over 6,000 miles, as a

* *Theosophical Movement.*

'monotony' of receptions, hospitalities, presentations, visits to holy ascetics and shrines, lectures, processions, and triumphs of every kind.*

Her first lecture was delivered at Tinnevelly, and in it she attacked and renounced the materialistic Western beliefs she herself had held up to four years before; at its conclusion she was garlanded upon the platform by the District Munsiff of Sri-Vaikuntam. Throughout the visit she seems to have looked out upon India through garlands and wreaths of flowers, and if, as some say, she pleased the Indians by flattery, saying that she came among them to speak of their ancient greatness, she but repaid them what they gave her again and again. The Annual Convention of the Society at Adyar that December was crowded, the enthusiastic students sleeping in the hall overnight to secure seats. Olcott accompanied her everywhere, guarding her, mothering her, and basking in her glory. 'The night's blackness is rolling away,' he proclaimed with a touch of her own manner, 'the dawn of a happier day is breaking.' In March he went with her to Bombay, where at the railway station she was greeted lyrically and with more garlands: 'O Annie! heroine among the learned, you are a rare personage, and have become, O good lady, a priceless repository of excellent knowledge by churning the great ocean of truth.'

Before leaving for Europe on March 22nd (but promising a swift return) she contributed to a native paper, *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, an important article in which she announced: 'My work in the sphere of politics is over, and I shall never resume it. . . . I say this in answer to your suggestion that I should be

* Some of the interest and enthusiasm, one may hazard, was due to quite un-Theosophical causes; Bradlaugh was by reputation in India a great figure and a hero to many, and Mrs Besant was of course known as his comrade and as an orator of comparable skill and passion.

aroused to take interest in Indian "affairs". To be able to lay at the feet of India any service is to me full reward for the many sufferings of a stormy life through which the power of service has been won. But the India that I love and reverence, and would fain see living among the nations, is not an India westernized, rent with the struggles of political parties, heated with the fires of political passions, with a people ignorant and degraded, while those who might have raised them are fighting for the loaves and fishes of political triumph. . . . The India to which I belong in faith and heart is . . . a civilization in which spiritual knowledge was accounted highest title to honour, and in which the people reverenced and sought after spiritual truth. To help in turning India into another Great Britain or another Germany is an ambition that does not allure me; the India I would give my life to help in building is an India learned in the ancient philosophy, pulsing with the ancient religion—an India to which all other lands should look for spiritual life—where the life of all should be materially simple, but intellectually noble and spiritually sublime. . . . I honestly believe that the future of India, the greatness of India, and the happiness of her people, can never be secured by political methods, but only by the revival of her philosophy and religion. To this, therefore, I must give all my energies, and I must refuse to spread them over other fields.'

In this statement there is not only a startling renunciation—even more startling to-day than then—but a very complete dedication of her gifts and energies to India. The first fulfilment of her promise came with her return before the end of the year, and soon after that her adoption of Benares as her home. Thenceforward her trips to Europe and to England were to be but visits.

During her first 1893–1894 tour there had been some

complaint, even in the pages of the *Theosophist*, that her lectures * leaned altogether too much to Hinduism ; it was said that she bathed in the Ganges and appeared publicly in Hindu dress. Olcott denied these statements, but she quickly became, what she has remained, an adherent of Hinduism, because, as she said many years later, it seemed to her ' the most satisfactory exposition of the Wisdom '. This may well have been a sufficient reason for her conversion, for there is much in the basic ideas of Hindu theology to attract an ex-Rationalist, but she may too have shared to some extent the feelings of Madame Blavatsky when she became a Buddhist : ' I wanted to show that I thought a religion of the East was rather better than the religion of the West.' It was probably a gesture as well as a profession. Mrs Besant sought to identify herself with India (and clearly it was bound to be a religious identification), and she did it so successfully that it has been said ' that " our " to Mrs Besant in England, talking to Englishmen, means Indian, not English '.

It is easy to suggest, but difficult to be sure in the light of her renunciation of politics, what was her real attitude and feeling towards India and things Indian in the middle nineties. Her work in India since then falls clearly, as she herself points out, into four divisions, each involving a different procedure, subject, and period. Her interest up to 1898 was primarily religious ; from 1898 until 1903 she was busied with education, necessarily, according to her ideas, upon a religious basis ; about 1903 she took up social reform, and it was not until 1913 that at last, definitely and irrevocably, she returned to politics. Each period, it must be noted, included the

* Her Convention lectures were directed ' to vindicate at once the usefulness of the Theosophical and Hindu doctrines, . . . to show the identity of these doctrines, and to prove that anyone who believes the Theosophical teachings must accept those of the *Vedas* and the *Puranas* on fundamental matters '.

activities of the one before it ; each led on, implicitly, to its successor.

Did she foresee that this must be so ? Did she realize that no true spiritual revival is possible in a nation ruled by a foreign bureaucracy seeking to impose foreign conditions and a foreign consciousness ; that such a revival must be based upon a living national self-consciousness, a pride in the past, in the tradition of the arts, in ancient industries and customs ? Did she realize that such a living self-consciousness could never be created in schools intended to supply such an officialdom with clerks and servants, and that sooner or later the challenge and the break with that officialdom must come—beginning with the moulding of the stuff of politics (that is, with education), and ending with politics itself ; leading her back sooner or later to as active an opposition to the British Government's policy as any campaign she had ever undertaken ? It is hard to believe she did not. Lord Haldane described her—it is said—as the greatest of living statesmen, and if her foresight and patience have not already been proved they may be suggested by recalling the fact that in 1893 she wished to take up at once, among other such questions, that of the education of Indian girls. She was advised to wait until in the course of time she should have won the confidence of the Hindu community—and so for ten years she did wait. Did her foresight in the larger case fail her, or was her declaration in itself a political move ? If it was so, if indeed in 1893 she saw what 1913 must infallibly bring forth, but knew that the country was not ready, that the national spirit still slumbered, and so for twenty years laboured in silent knowledge laying the foundations of future freedom, then it must be admitted that she stands not merely among the greatest of living statesmen, but with the greatest statesmen of whom history has record, and her attitude and her

patience must be taken as a model and an example for all time.

Such an explanation is, for all its attractiveness, perhaps a little too flattering, and the evidence is, on the whole, just weighted against it. In the first place, this was for her a period of reaction from politics and political methods. All the fiery enthusiasm of her nature was asserting its faith in the formative value of the spirit. It was necessary, she had declared not long before in England, to produce Socialists by spiritual evolution before Socialism would be possible as a political measure, and she seems to have accepted absolutely that point of view. Secondly, she regarded India as a special case. Since the Crown had taken over the government of India in the fifties, generations had emerged which accepted their subject position and looked to the West for all things. The ancient forms of village life and government were rapidly disintegrating, and the purely secular Western education of the universities was producing a widespread contempt for Indian religions and customs. It cast out, but put nothing in the place of what it cast out. The seventies and eighties saw among students a wave of scepticism similar to that in England, but far more superficial because less deeply rooted. The Christian missionaries at that time, as later, were more successful in spreading materialism and disbelief than their own gospels, for they too proved better able to cast out than to replace. Yet in the eighties there appears at last a real intellectual renaissance, religious in its origins but producing also a new attitude towards the old vernaculars. Among 'other things that awakened pride and self-respect were the discovery of the West that Sanskrit was the earliest and in many ways the most remarkable of the known Indo-Aryan languages, and increased study and exaltation of India's ancient literature'.* For the

* *History of India*, by Edward Thompson (1927).

initiation of this movement the Theosophical Society has claimed all its share—probably a good deal more than its share. Speaking in 1909 Mrs Besant said that when Olcott and Madame Blavatsky landed in India in 1879 scepticism and materialism prevailed everywhere, and that the revival began with their propaganda for Hindu teachings and philosophy, and with their conversion to Buddhism—then the only Eastern religion that would give them shelter. 'Even when I came to India, Indians told me that India was dead; they smiled sadly at my statement that India was not dead, but sleeping. She is not sleeping to-day.' * She adopted the attitude she found already prevailing in the Society, that India's characteristic contribution to the world aggregate was spiritual. There was a place for politics, she admitted, but wisdom was more than politics, and the teacher and thinker more than the politician. India's heritage was not political, and it would be a world disaster should she reject the spiritual for the material.

Finally, there existed in the Society at this time a policy, if not exactly a tradition, of abstinence from politics, in the beginning enforced by the nature of its origin. When its founders first came to India they were for some time regarded with official disfavour, it being suspected that Madame Blavatsky was a Russian spy. These suspicions were quickly dispelled, but members were careful to confine their activities to non-political spheres. It was in fact Mrs Besant who first broke away on a large scale from this policy, a step for which numerous Theosophists have attacked her, so that at last she was driven to defend herself. 'There are two views of Theosophical work, one narrow and one wide, which are current in the Theosophical Society, and on which members should make up their minds, and having done so, should act accordingly. The first is the view that the

* *Work of the T. S. in India.*

Divine Wisdom consists in the teaching of a certain body of doctrines . . . and this is the only proper work of the Theosophical Society. A certain application of these teachings to the conditions of the day is perhaps allowable, but such application tends to stray into forbidden paths, and is of doubtful desirability. The other view is that the Divine Wisdom, " sweetly and mightily ordering all things ", exists in the world for the world's helping, and nothing is alien from it which is of service to Humanity. The chief work of those who profess themselves its votaries will therefore be the work which is most needed at the time. . . . It is obvious that since I entered the Theosophical Society I have encouraged the wider view.' *

2

Not for a long while, however, was such a defence to prove necessary, for at first, even when she broke away from her efforts to expound to Indians ' the insufficiency of materialism as an answer to the problems of life ' and to advocate the organization of education in India upon Indian national lines, she was but following the precedent established by Colonel Olcott with his free schools in India and Ceylon for the children of the ' untouchables '.

The first fruit of her propaganda was the establishment in 1898 of the Central Hindu College in Benares. Originally this was supported only by local Hindus and some Theosophists, and opened with four classes in a small house, but within a year the Maharajah of Benares gave land and a large block of buildings in the outskirts of the city. The basic principles of the College, summed up by Mrs Besant in 1899, were : ' The teaching of the Hindu religion, the uniting of Indians and Englishmen in friendly co-operation, in a common work, using racial

* *Theosophist*, January 1915.

differences for help, not for hindrance, the affording of a cheap but first-class education—the cost being met in the old Indian fashion by the gifts of the pious and the self-sacrifice of the teachers, instead of out of the pockets of the students.' * Her liberalism was revealed in the choice the College gave its pupils between English and Indian education, her good sense in the decision that the English-educated must learn Sanskrit, and the Sanskrit-educated, English, so that there might be no barriers to understanding between them. Also, though she held that the object of education was ' to raise the intellect of man to understand the problems of life ' she did not hesitate to attack the Hindu students for despising manual and technical training in favour of literary or clerical. No shame, she insisted, could attach to any honest labour, except when badly done. Her declared ideal was ' an education founded on Indian ideals and enriched, not dominated, by the thought and culture of the West '. The Government, she said in 1903, meant well, but failed by its lack of imagination. The English teachers and educational commissioners could not understand or allow for Indian psychology, besides raising the cost of education to make it prohibitive to Indians. What was wanted was educated Indians as teachers rather than ' highly-paid Englishmen ', and indeed what she strove for was a system of schools controlled and staffed by Indians, pursuing not imposed European but innate Eastern ideals, studying Sanskrit not Latin, not English but Indian history, and native art and literature and music. Education under the Government, she objected, was diverted from its true purpose of developing individual faculties to that of passing examinations and gaining degrees.†

The College was successful from the beginning, and by

* *Theosophist*, November 1899.

† See *England and India* and *Education as a National Duty*.

1901, as a result of her hard work, was already on a firm foundation and rapidly expanding, though too slowly to contain all the pupils desiring admission. Boys would 'walk literally hundreds of miles, begging their way, to reach the school, and to all arguments as to "no room", "we cannot take more free scholars", such a one would only answer: "Mother, you *must* teach me."' It was affiliated to the Allahabad University, the authorities of which presently accused it of disloyalty and using education as a cloak for politics.* In 1905, however, it was visited by the present King and Queen, then Prince and Princess of Wales. This, with the subsequent commendation of her work by the Viceroy (Lord Minto), presumably set the seal of official approval upon the College. Later still she organized a petition to the King for the establishment of an Indian National University upon C.H.C. lines; the petition was not successful, but the College itself became in due course the nucleus of the present Hindu University, to-day a rallying point for many of the best elements in Hindu thought and culture.

She seems no longer to have sought for women the absolute equality she once claimed; they had a

* In some quarters, however, Mrs Besant has been accused of 'kowtowing' to officialdom, because she stood so strongly against the participation of her students in politics. Again, in 1913, following the Krishnamurti case, she withdrew from all active connection with the C.H.C. and from the Hindu University Committee 'because my Theosophy makes me unwelcome there'; it has been alleged that she withdrew because she was forced and had no alternative, but it is only fair to say that she had proclaimed her intention long before of leaving the C.H.C. to stand on its own feet at the earliest suitable moment. Her action was, however, undoubtedly precipitated by the publication in an Allahabad newspaper (*Leader*, April 13th 1913) of a circular letter by G. S. Arundale, Principal of the College. Addressed to a group of teachers and boys within the College, it expressed their unqualified devotion to Mrs Besant as one about to become one of the greatest rulers of the world of Gods and men. Public allegations were made that the College was not Hindu but Theosophical. Arundale and a number of teachers resigned in a body. The Board of Trustees, without further ado, handed the College over to the Committee of the projected Hindu University.

different function to fulfil, and the girl must be educated as the wife and mother, not as 'the rival and competitor of man in all forms of outside and public employment, as woman, under different economic conditions, is coming to be, more and more, in the West'. The essentials of desirable training for Indian girls were, first, religious and moral education; second, literary education, including languages, history, and geography; third, household knowledge and hygiene, cookery, medicine, etc; fourth, artistic education, as of music and needlework; and fifth, physical culture.* Upon these principles she founded in 1904 in Benares the Central Hindu Girls' School, and two years later and at intervals subsequently there were opened in various parts numerous other schools for women and — following Olcott's example—the 'depressed classes' especially. To take over and unite all these activities the Theosophical Educational Trust was established in 1913 as a registered body, with Mrs Besant as President and about twenty other members. Among other products of its work may be mentioned the Madanapalle High School and College, the Adyar National College, and a Women's College in Benares founded in 1916. All over the country to-day, it is said, exist 'a large number' of Theosophist and National Schools still mainly financed from funds controlled by her. Her experiences as a teacher, and even more as a member of the London School Board, were invaluable in connection with all her Indian educational work, and London, looking eastward, may well feel that another's gain has been its irreparable loss. Mrs Besant's text-books dealing with Hindu religious legend, it may be noted in passing, are used widely in Indian schools.†

* *Education of Indian Girls.*

† Those who care for Boy Scouts may be pleased to note as a minor activity of her later years the organization of the Indian Boy Scout Movement since 1918. Later her movement was affiliated with the Baden-Powell Scout Movement in India, and in April 1921 she was appointed Honorary Commissioner for all India of the United Boy Scouts Association.

In 1921 the Benares Hindu University conferred upon her the degree of Doctor of Letters in recognition of her valued and continuous services to Indian education. A more substantial recognition was the special act of the Indian Legislature by which she is enabled to sit upon the governing body of the University—the one exception to the rule which admits only Hindus by birth.

3

When first she came to India, she was said to have taken up a reactionary attitude, particularly in the field of social reform. Her accusers were on one hand those Indians who recalled regretfully her radical labours in England; on the other the Christian missionaries. It would be truer to call her attitude preservative. Theosophically, she strove to see the soul of good even in things evil; she desired, specifically, to approach Indian customs and prejudices from the Indian point of view; above all she wanted to avoid any suggestion that she came to India merely, or indeed in any degree, as a westernizer. Yet that she set her face from the very first against what seemed to her definitely cruel or wasteful of human material is made clear by the position she adopted even in the nineties with regard to child-marriage. The Central Hindu College was for a long while the only institution in India which first excluded married boys from its lower classes, then imposed double fees upon all married students, and finally shut them out altogether. The same principle was followed in all the schools controlled by the Theosophical Educational Trust. The missionaries, she suggested in 1913, might have done better to follow her example instead of merely preaching against child-marriage.

The fact is that in this matter of Hindu customs and reform her ideas changed with experience. Her attitude to caste affords an example. In 1894 she took the view that caste originally represented a functional reality, election to one section or another being decided not by birth but by ability. 'The first eleven years of my working in India, I worked perpetually at the attempt to revive the idea of dharma, of function, in relation to the four great castes. By 1905 I had come to the conclusion that it was hopeless; that you could not get those who were the highest caste to go back to the old duties, to give up the power, the wealth, that they were accumulating, and the life, the larger life in the world, which had become their natural expression. By that time I saw the task was hopeless, and from that time onwards I have been working slowly to form an opinion in favour of change. Seeing, then, in the words that I have lately quoted, that the system was dying, I urged that we should try to make the transition as easy as possible; that amid "the crash of falling systems" we should try to carry on the realities while we could not carry on the form; and failing in that also from 1905 onwards, I have found myself compelled to go a step further and to say: It is not possible to do anything more than to admit that the form is now but a shell and not a reality, that it answers neither to natural facts nor to social functions, nor to anything of the historical conditions which once in the past made caste valuable, nay, priceless, to India. I regret it, but am bound to say that I do not believe the caste system can continue in India in the changing life of the nation, and with the heavy responsibilities which, more and more, still fall upon her sons. Since the castes will not perform their dharma, since none are willing to take up special work because they have the birthright, I think we must be honest and say that qualities and castes are separate. . . .

It seems to me, friends, that the steps that we have to take now are steps which shall abolish the distinctions of caste which no longer represent realities.' *

The quotation affords an excellent example of her frank facing and acceptance of realities, and the same spirit is apparent in every department of her reform work. Child-marriage she opposed not only in the school but on the platform : ' The future of India as a nation depends on the abolition of child-marriage amongst the people. . . . As long as that persists, there are certain inevitable consequences of lowered vitality, of the spread of nervous diseases, of premature old age, all of which you can see going on in the India of to-day.' † Something of her labour for the education of girls has been indicated ; she worked too to ameliorate the lot of child and other widows.

In connection with the outcast classes, again, she made no attempt to spare Hindu feelings : ' You complain, and justly, of the harsh and rude manners often shown to you by your English rulers, but are they one-hundreth part as insolent to you as you are insolent to this race whom you, in the past, brought under your yoke ? '‡ (At the same time she refused to exaggerate the problem, and admitted that the West too had its outcasts, slum-dwellers with whom the ' refined classes ' do not ' dream ' of coming into contact.) In this as in all other such matters she not only urged others to effort but strove actively herself, and in a practical manner, for the reforms she sought : ' In one of our Panchama Schools, the scavenger school, we made the first lesson a bath. The children now come clean, but for some time every boy had to bring on his head a pot of water in order that the first lesson might be the cleansing of his own body. Then a clean cloth was given, and the dirty cloth from

* *Wake Up, India* (*Passing of the Caste System*).
† *Ibid.* (*Child-Marriage*). ‡ *Ibid.*

home was washed and put out to dry. Before he left school, the school cloth was washed, and the clean cloth washed in the morning put on, in order that he might go home clean from the school. It is the practical way of dealing with it, and the right way of dealing with it, if you want to raise these children ; for cleanliness is more comfortable than dirt, and after they have a clean day in the school, they are not willing to go back into the filth of the home ; and so they go out as missionaries of cleanliness, teaching their fathers and mothers, their brothers and sisters, and thus the school reacts upon the home, and the whole type is raised by the teaching of the instructed child.' * The allied question of the colour-bar comes under rather a different heading ; she has at all times consistently opposed it. In its upholding she discerns the seeds of a fatal conflict between East and West, which only toleration and the union of Britain and self-governing India within the Empire can avert.

In 1906 she organized within the Theosophical Society the Sons of India and Daughters of India, native associations to work for Indian social reform. In 1912 a new body, the Theosophical Stalwarts, appeared, each member taking a pledge to show by personal example that he dissociated himself from certain customs ; in 1913 this developed into an Order of the Brothers of Service, who bound themselves to disregard all caste restrictions, not to marry their sons under the age of twenty-one or their daughters under seventeen, to educate their wives and daughters, to promote the education of women generally and to discountenance their seclusion, to ignore all colour distinctions, and to oppose social ostracism of remarried widows.

In all these things she was trying singly and steadfastly to get to the root of the matter, the building of individual character. Fail in that, she taught, and every

* *Wake up, India.*

reform must fail. Caste restricted such development; child-marriage destroyed health and produced ailing offspring; education, mass-education on the right lines, was a necessity; political education must be learned in the villages, upon village councils, in village co-operative societies; women must be freed, and educated not to lag behind, a continual weight of blind prejudice against all reform. Only by right development could freedom come; again and again she insisted that a nation to win freedom must be worthy of it. When at last in 1913 she definitely entered the political field, her first action was to deliver a series of addresses, the majority of which dealt with social reform.

It is impossible, at any rate up to this point, to speak too highly of her work in India—practical, far-seeing, patient, temperate, yet facing always towards the light. If many in all this will deny the evidence of high statesmanship, at least it must be said that she has given a better and more useful imitation of it than anything our Baldwins, Lloyd Georges, Gladstones, or Disraelis can produce.*

4

It was as early as 1902 that she came to an open statement of the wider issues implicit in her religious, educational, and reformist work in India, which were to lead directly to her open advocacy of politics in 1913. She has been always, as any successful statesman must be,

* It is worth recording that there is practically nothing in the main indictment of Katherine Mayo's notorious *Mother India* which is not touched upon, generally in some detail, in the voluminous writings of Mrs Besant on India since 1893. But in the latter we find too a far truer perspective. It seems vastly more significant that one who has lived in India for thirty-four years, who has always admitted and faced and fought these unpleasant realities, should finally emerge as a leading champion of Indian Home Rule, than that a visitor of a few months should oppose it.

sensitive to the shiftings and wakenings of public opinion, and perhaps her change of attitude may be taken as indicative of a gathering change in Indian public opinion dating from the beginning of this century. In an address * delivered in London in 1902 she charged the people of England with knowing little and caring less about the people of India for whose good government they were responsible. 'I ask you whether you have a right to rule 300,000,000 of people in name, and not understand the alphabet of Indian questions, even very largely in your Imperial Parliament? For what do we see? That when an Indian debate is held there great stretches of green cloth take the place of legislators, and only a few people interest themselves in the questions which are vital for the future of our Empire.' The main blunders were due to the fact that England sought to rule India on Western rather than on typically Indian lines. 'Methods of land-holding, methods of taxation, economic systems, which are suitable for Great Britain, do not suit that vast Asiatic nation whose traditions, whose customs, whose habits, are utterly different from our own.' The attitude of Englishmen going out to India was that of men going out to exile, to make money and return as soon as possible. 'India is not ruled for the prospering of the people, but rather for the profit of her conquerors, and her sons are being treated as a conquered race.' She spoke, too, of the evils of the famines, which the English sought to relieve while neglecting their causes. 'What causes the famines? Partly the financial drain of the "Home Charges" and the huge bureaucracy. Partly the destruction of the manufactures of India for the profit of Lancashire, the compulsory revelation of trade secrets, and the forcing on India of English methods of production. Partly the destruction of the communal system of land-tenure, the imposing of the English

* *Theosophy and Imperialism.*

system of landlordism, of rigid rents and taxes, levied in lieu of the flexible indigenous system of proportionate rents and taxes paid in kind ; partly the network of railways facilitating the buying up of crops and sweeping them away for export. . . . Even this year, while famine threatened, Indian wheat was thrown into foreign markets.' Elsewhere * she stated her conviction that even the educated Englishman is not interested in India, and that its satisfactory government by the British Parliament is impossible. Much more practical would be the establishment in India of a council of the wisest of its people, its best administrators, as feudatory chiefs, gathered around a Viceroy appointed not for political services in England but for some knowledge and understanding of India. Again, in 1903, we find a clear statement of the ideals which ever since have animated her : ' India must be governed on the basis of Indian feelings, Indian traditions, Indian thoughts and Indian ideas. . . . I dream of the time when India, England, Australasia, and Canada will all join hands in the making of a common Empire, when India's children will bring their priceless treasures to the enriching of that Empire.' †

It may seem a matter for wonder that holding these views in 1903 Mrs Besant waited ten years before advancing openly into the field of active politics. But it must be noted that the decade 1903–1913 marked a historical period in India's own development. The roots of the change foreshadowed by her went back into the past ; now came at last the flowering.

The period from 1858, when the Crown took over the government of India, to 1885, the year of the first meeting of the Indian National Congress, was the vital seeding-time. It witnessed a deep and widespread renaissance in Indian religion and the arts, as well as ' a

* *England and India.* † *Education as a National Duty.*

steady spread of the official administrative machinery to cover inch by inch, ever deeper and ever wider, almost the entire secular life of the people. In other words, on the one hand while the real life of the people was being revitalized deeper and more poignantly within, the framework of external life was all the time being enmeshed in a foreign-controlled system, which was impersonal and soulless, and whose votaries apparently worshipped at the one shrine of efficiency.' *

Again, in the new Government universities students were absorbing Western principles of democracy and free rule. All these conflicting elements found presently inevitable expression in the Indian National Congress, the majority of the founders of which were Indian Theosophists who, after the 1884 Theosophical Convention at Adyar, met in Madras and formed the first Committee of the future Congress, a purely unofficial body the history of which to 1914 is recorded in Mrs Besant's bulky compilation, *How India Wrought for Freedom*. From the beginning it had to face the opposition of British officials and business men generally, but to the Indians themselves its annual assembly ' was a visible symbol of our national entity, of our common heritage, of our common grievances, of our common aspirations, hopes, and ideals, of our great common goal. The Congress was in itself a gesture, an earnest of the progressive consummation of our national solidarity.' † It was, too, something more than a mere annual assembly : ' From the Congress the leaders did not go home to rest on their oars for the next twelve months. The Congress had quickly given birth to Provincial Conferences, and these in their turn to District Conferences. Moreover, the Congress organization, flimsy as it looked on paper, was powerful enough at a moment's notice to organize the voicing of public opinion throughout the country when

* *British Connection with India*, by K. T. Paul. † *Ibid.*

any occasion of real grievance or danger arose in any locality.' *

From 1885 the renaissance went on in the various fields of art, commerce, and politics. Indians were acquiring a national consciousness and self-respect. The Congress might have no official standing, yet it served increasingly as a nucleus of both active workers and public opinion. And later, as British prestige in the East suffered one blow after another, it accumulated more and more importance. The South African War showed 'how much weakness and incompetence lay beneath the splendid surface of England's imperial power'; † the Russo-Japanese War proved that Europe was no inevitable victor. 'A thrill of hope ran through Asia, Asia invaded, Asia troubled by white "spheres of influence", with settlements of white people, insolent and dominant, rebelling against Eastern laws, rejecting Eastern customs with contempt, humiliating coloured Nations in their own lands and arrogating powers to which they had no right. Despair changed into hope. Asia awoke, and with Asia India.' ‡

Resentment indeed was growing through all these early years of the new century. Mr Arnold Bennett has objected to my description § of Lord Curzon as in his own way one of the stupidest men who ever set foot in India, and the phrase may seem to overlook his interest in India's past and his desire for justice as between Englishman and Indian; nevertheless it is not difficult to justify it in the case of a man whose rule was probably more disastrous to the friendship of Britain and India than that of any other person. To the end of his life Curzon appeared to take pleasure in contemptuously referring to India (as upon one occasion in the House of Lords) as 'a distant dependency of the

* *British Connection with India.* † *History of India.* ‡ *India : Bond or Free?*
§ *Mrs Annie Besant* (Representative Women Series, 1927.)

British Empire', and whatever his interest in India's ancient monuments his regard for the traditions of modern India were conspicuously, not to say offensively, lacking. His thought, first and last, was for efficiency, and to that end he strove to centralize the working of the Civil Service, so that, according to Ramsay MacDonald in his book, *The Government of India*, the machine of government became a thing apart and by separating itself from the organic life of India emphasized more than ever the fact that India was ruled by foreigners. It was, probably, his detachment from the realities of Indian life which led him to commit his worst errors. In connection with the Coronation Durbar held at Delhi in January 1903, he was attacked in the National Congress both for his extravagance and for the humiliating treatment accorded to the Indian princes. The action of silently forcing vastly expensive celebrations upon a starving country may not have been, as some cynically suggest, particularly shocking to a people accustomed to such indifference in its potentates; nevertheless it did give a handle to 'agitators', and the general impression created by the affair has been aptly summarized by the late E. T. Raymond: 'If the elaborate show had been prepared for Lord Curzon's sole glorification, if the rajahs and maharajahs had been hidden there to serve no purpose but the advertisement of his importance in the scheme of things, the arrangements would not have needed much revision.' * In 1904 came his Universities Act, the practical effect of which was to make the cost of Indian education prohibitive. Indians certainly believed that Curzon saw their country simply as the scene of the Englishman's labours, with the toiling native millions as a kind of picturesque background. The educated Indians he disregarded, meeting their protests with repression. The twentieth National Congress met

* *Portraits of the New Century*, 1928.

at Bombay in 1904 to protest gloomily and hopelessly against his 'repressive and reactionary' policy. But it was in 1905 that he achieved, in the interests of efficiency, his crowning folly—the partition of the ancient province of Bengal against all the known wishes of the people. (Fortunately in that same year his rule ended.) The act was resented all over India as an attempt to break the newly realized nationalist consciousness of the province. A movement of angry protest spread widely, and many assassinations took place. The Swadeshi movement for India's economic independence, the development of her national industries, and the use of home-made rather than foreign goods, gained ground rapidly. To this upheaval Mrs Besant, though she had been a supporter and advocate of Swadeshi ever since her arrival in India, adopted a hostile attitude, perhaps because to some extent she was still isolated (in consequence of her other activities) from progressive political thought, but even more, probably, because she judged the ground not ready, or feared the division of India, or because she had learnt from Bradlaugh that violence can only breed violence, and that though tyranny must be resisted, it must be resisted lawfully.

In 1905 the National Congress had denounced the Viceroy; in 1906 there was a large gathering to support Swadeshi, and there, for the first time, the President brought forward the remedy of Self-Government for India: 'The whole matter can be comprised in one word, Self-Government, or Swaraj, like that of the United Kingdom or the Colonies. . . . Self-Government is the only and chief remedy. In Self-Government lies our hope, strength, and goodness. . . . Be united, persevere, so that the millions now perishing by poverty, famine, and plague and the scores of millions that are starving on scanty subsistence may be saved, and India may once more occupy her proud position of yore among

the greatest and civilized Nations of the West.' * In 1907 took place what Mrs Besant calls the saddest episode in the story of the Congress. The country was in turmoil, and the extremists in the Nationalist party were gaining strength and power. Lord Minto, the new Viceroy, was sympathetic, but his position was impossible, repression continued, and Keir Hardie, visiting the country in that year, wrote that ' everything in India is seditious which does not slavishly applaud every act of the Government '.† The moderate section was led by G. K. Gokhale, who stood for strictly constitutional methods; the extremists followed an old Congress member, B. G. Tilak. The latter was embittered by long Government persecution, his battle-cry was, ' Freedom is my birthright and I will have it ', and he was prepared to use any means to gain his end. At the 1907 Congress he tried to speak out of order, but was shouted down; men armed with sticks charged the platform, and after a bitter struggle the police cleared the hall. The Moderates called a Convention attended by some 900 of the 1,600 delegates, and it was agreed that their goal of Self-Government within the Empire as an equal partner must be attained ' by strictly constitutional means, by bringing about a steady reform of the existing system of administration, and by promoting National Unity, fostering public spirit, and improving the condition of the mass of the people '.‡

Since 1907, for all practical purposes, the division between Moderates and Extremists has remained, though the period thenceforward until after 1914 was, on the whole, one of reconstruction and the tacit acknowledgment by the Government of its mistakes. The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 came as a distinct concession, and in 1911, when the King and Queen visited India after

* Quoted in *India : Bond or Free ?* † *India : Impressions, etc.*
‡ *How India Wrought for Freedom.*

the Coronation, the Partition of Bengal was revoked. 'This act of justice taught India that, deprived of arms as she was, she was yet strong, even when all seemed hopeless, though the brutal methods of repression, the suffering endured by her self-sacrificing youth, aroused a deep and abiding hatred, which dug a gulf between the Bengalis and the English rulers, and was the parent of later revolutionary movements in that province.' * For the time being the Extremist activities were eclipsed, and the final result when the immediate irritation had died down was that the Nationalist movement emerged conscious and consolidated as never before. Disengaged, as it were, from the temporary cause of its new vitality, it continued to exist for larger ends. Curzon had brought about in half a dozen years what a wiser Viceroy might have delayed for as many decades.

The moment had come, Mrs Besant seems to have felt, to take up actively the demand for Self-Government. 'Hardinge was the Viceroy and Gokhale had the leadership of India. It was an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust based on substantial convictions and tried experiences' †—an atmosphere to be preserved not by standing still but by moving forward. She was not merely inventing a slogan but announcing a fact when in 1913 she began to proclaim publicly that 'the price of India's loyalty is India's freedom'.

5

She was driven into Indian politics because, she has said, everywhere 'the intolerable pressure of tyrannical legislation hampered all forward action'.‡ 'It is

* *India : Bond or Free ?* † *British Connection with India.*

‡ *India : Bond or Free ?* Certain critics see as the simple cause of her entry into politics the refusal of the Government of India to grant a charter conferring upon the Central Hindu College the status of a University ;

possible that I should have carried out my idea in the nineties, of not resuming any constant political work had not increasing repression by the authorities, the narrowing of liberty, the ill-treatment of students, and the danger of revolution forced me into the field. It became increasingly difficult to do any educational, religious, or social work, and the boys I loved were being maddened into crime. Liberty was being strangled to death, and I, as one of her old soldiers, could not stand aside. I joined the political campaign not to lead, but to take risks.' *

She took up the new cause with a will, and from the first her indictment of the British Government was no tentative one. India, she declared, was a prosperous nation before the coming of the East India Company; her acknowledged wealth was proof of a vast industrial output among the masses, and of a generally settled society in which credit was good and commercial integrity the rule. She alleged, on the other hand, that the English had dislocated native industries (by general impoverishment, by lack of encouragement, and by such unfair commercial competition as the Cotton Excise, abolished in 1925), and that the Government prevented recovery by taxation and fiscal arrangements. She alleged that British educational work in India had been good on the whole, but inadequate; in eighty years the British had educated only a fortieth of the people, while Japan in half that time educated practically its whole population; moreover, it was directed to benefit British —that is, to produce clerks—rather than Indians. The

realizing after the Krishnamurti case of 1913 that she could not longer hope for official support, she angrily joined the opposition. This, for reasons already stated, seems to me a superficial view. What took place in 1913 was only the final and inevitable step of a progress of twenty years; no doubt the immediate situation influenced her, but I cannot regard it as the sole cause.

* *New India*, April 4th 1917.

building of railways had been beneficial, but even they were planned for strategic, not economic, purposes. Until recently irrigation, reafforestation, and sanitation had all been neglected, and native arts and industries destroyed to favour the import of cheap foreign goods ; the export of raw materials was encouraged rather than their use in the country itself. British rule was costly ; Europeans were invariably employed in the highest posts at the best salaries, and large pensions were the rule. India was forced to pay for a large standing army, one of whose purposes was to hold India in subjection, for the British ruled as autocrats, and found coercion easier than improvement. She alleged that ' British rule in India is insufficient in the matters that concern the Nation's life ; that India is slowly wasting away and will inevitably perish, unless she regains her right to rule herself. Former conquerors have settled down in the land and become Indians, have become good citizens ; the British are birds of passage, attracted by the high salaries and power attached to members of " the ruling race ", and the pensions attached to the Services. I know there is much cant about England being the trustee for India's welfare, but I also remember the rejoinder to the statement that " Providence has thrown the responsibility of India's government on the House of Commons ", that " The House of Commons has thrown it back upon Providence ".' *

She believed that if Self-Government did cause a recrudescence of local jealousies and divisions it would be local and temporary only, and that the withdrawal of the English would not in any case mean a lapse into barbarism for a country which had existed prosperously for some five thousand years before they came. But her leading charge was that the East India Company first, and the British Government later, had destroyed the

* *India : Bond or Free ?*

ancient village system of India, for countless centuries the deeper wealth-producing basis over which the superficial tides of the changing dynasties had flowed to and fro with but little effect. Each village in older days was a communal organization, self-supporting and self-governing, each with its council, its officials, and servants (including its schoolmaster, for each village then had its school, and the village children generally were able to read and write); each saving in times of plenty for times of need. Under the original system the officials worked well because they were directly responsible to those about them; following the imposition of government from above this was no longer so—it was to their interest to please not their electors but their English superiors. 'If the failure of the British rule in India were to be ascribed to one reason, it is the breakdown of the village system.' * Again, by the substitution of peasant-proprietorship for the communal holding of land, and a change in the method of taxation, a fixed sum of money being demanded instead of a fixed proportion of the crop, the peasant was delivered, all too often, into the hands of the money-lender. Ever since 1904 Mrs Besant had been working for the revival in their old form of the village councils, and of the village as a necessary unit of Local Self-Government. In 1913 she suggested that 'the ancient system prevalent here dealt with things in a much more practical way, a way which made Self-Government at once effective, competent, and real. If the Future is to be built on the Past, then we must have the Village Councils, the "grouped Villages" Councils, and so on in extending areas to the District and Provincial Councils or Local Parliaments, which would send representatives to the Imperial Council. None would be without a share in governing, but his power would be limited to the area

* *Problem of India*, by Rao and Pole.

over which his knowledge extended, and there would be no barrier anywhere to the rising of the competent.' *

These were her main criticisms and the basis of the leading constructive principles she still upholds. From the past must the future be built, and the Indian future from the Indian, not the British past. It must be free to develop upon its own characteristic lines. In 1919, asked before a Joint Committee of the House of Lords and Commons 'whether India would ever be satisfied with a Constitution drawn up by Englishmen, I replied in the negative, basing the reply on the great age of her civilization and the difference of manners and customs '.†

The facts, the view of India's past, upon which these arguments depend are often disputed, though they have the support of many historians of every school and party. But another, somewhat different argument has the merit of being unanswerable from any point of view: 'It is not a question whether the rule is good or bad. German efficiency in Germany is far greater than English efficiency in England; the Germans were better fed, had more amusements and leisure, less crushing poverty than the English. But would any Englishman therefore desire to see Germans occupying all the highest positions in England? Why not? Because the righteous self-respect and dignity of the free man revolt against foreign domination, however superior.' ‡ Elsewhere she has put the whole attitude in a phrase: 'Better bullock carts and freedom than a *train de luxe* with subjection.'

She has never at any time or under any pressure of circumstances departed from her proclamation that the price of India's loyalty is India's freedom. Never has she sought India's separation from the Empire; it would be truer to say that, recognizing not only as desirable but as inevitable the increasing Indian demand for Self-Government, she strove to guide that demand towards

* *India: Bond or Free?* † *Ibid.* ‡ *Ibid.*

the idea of Home Rule within the Empire, rather than as an independent country. It should be clear that there was no question of her raising a new issue. The movement of revolt was there, and going deeper than either she or others had imagined. It was expedient to work for Home Rule for the sake not only of India but of the Empire.

6

In addition to the series of lectures in Madras in the autumn of 1913 with which she launched her new campaign, she suggested to the Indian National Congress, still to some degree suffering from the results of the split of 1907, that it should set itself at the head of an active ' national movement embodying religious, educational, and social, as well as political, reforms '. The Congress, though it welcomed the powerful aid of her advocacy, deemed this too broad a basis to be practicable. But she was not to be put off ; she decided to found a weekly paper in which to propagate her ideas, and after six weeks of hard work brought out on January 2nd 1914 the first number of *The Commonweal*, which interested itself mainly in the subject of mutual relations between England and India. It demanded Indian Self-Government not as a gift but as a right, under the educative control of British statesmanship until the country seemed ready for full Colonial autonomy. It ' recognized the National Congress and the non-official members of representative bodies as voicing the will of India ', and asked ' that capacity and high character shall determine all appointments to office, and that colour and religion shall be entirely disregarded as qualifications '. ' One thing that lies very near to our hearts is to draw Great Britain and India nearer to each

other by making known in Great Britain something of Indian movements, and of the men who will influence from here the destinies of the Empire.'

That spring she visited London, and tried to form an Indian party in Parliament; she failed, for Home Rule just then connoted only Ireland. India was so much farther off! Outside Parliament too she strove to waken and unite the existing body of opinion which favoured some Radical remedy for Indian unrest, and an auxiliary Home Rule League for India was founded before her return in the summer. By July she was in India again. The weekly paper proved already insufficient for her needs, and on July 14th *The Madras Standard* appeared for the first time under her ownership and control. A few days later its new policy was announced, urging that 'instead of asking for Reforms piecemeal, we should bend our energies to win Self-Government, Home Rule, and make the Reforms for ourselves'; its title was changed to *New India*.

Then, while all was still in a state of preparation, came the War. Upon India's ready and whole-hearted response there is no need to enlarge. On the civilian side 'there was immediate and absolute unanimity among all Indian parties that all political activity should be suspended and that the utmost effort should be made to support Britain in the giant contest'.* Even Gandhi actively aided recruiting. Mrs Besant was not backward. As an occultist she regarded its events as 'the shadow of a struggle in the higher worlds' between the White Brotherhood and the Lords of the Dark Face, whose servants the Germans were. She was, therefore, necessarily strongly anti-German. This caused a temporary split in the ranks of the Theosophical Society, but the old bonds have since been resumed.

Yet apparently it was Mrs Besant, and before the end

* *British Connection with India.*

of 1914 too, who broke the political truce. It is not easy to suggest exactly why. Possibly she realized, as an Indian writer suggests, that 'supposing Mrs Besant had not been, even then it is highly doubtful if the self-imposed restraint *could* have been observed for a very long time. The war was never so "near" India as to make that absorbing demand on the attention that it did on the "nearer" combatants; and it was drawn out too long, much longer than was contemplated, when the restraint was self-imposed with such willing alacrity'.* Possibly she felt that the longer things stood still the more the likelihood of leadership passing into the hands of the dangerous elements, especially as Gokhale was now dead and the sincere but fiery Tilak winning ground again. British war speeches were having their effect; when the Prime Minister proclaimed it 'inconceivable and intolerable' that one nation should rule another, levy taxes, hold the highest offices, make her laws, and control her policy—he was picturing the horrors of a German victory—it does not seem to have occurred to him that Indians would see this precisely as their position, and continue to grow restive under the 'intolerable degradation of a foreign yoke'.

Possibly it did occur to Mrs. Besant, and she deemed that to control was better than simply to neglect. She saw that she must have the National Congress on her side if Indian opinion was to be united. Undaunted, therefore, by the rebuff of the previous year, she appeared at the Madras Congress of 1914 (held in December for the first time upon the platform, moving a resolution, which was carried, asking for reciprocity between India and the Colonies in the matters of emigration. 'Whatever rule a Colony made as to the entry of Indians, that rule should India make as to the entry

* *British Connection with India.*

into India of people of that Colony. Again, India might exclude imports where her people were excluded.' She also supported a resolution claiming Self-Government for India. That was all; probably she was feeling her way before bringing forward in detail her definite proposals; but she proved her devotion to the Congress by producing in 1915 her record of its past progress, and by working hard throughout the year for the reunion of its still divided parties, an effort which met with some temporary success. Her newspapers were an effective medium for propaganda, and she travelled widely, speaking to vast audiences, laying not only among the intelligentsia but among the people the foundations of a living movement for Indian Home Rule within the Empire. On this subject, despite the long-existing unrest, thought was still nebulous and timid. Hers, executed with ' velocity and insistence ', was the first definite campaign. One minor example of the practical lines upon which she worked is afforded by her establishment in Madras of a Parliamentary Debating Society on the lines of the old Charing Cross Parliament, designed to give Indians training in political forms and usages.

At the 1915 Bombay Congress she brought forward a detailed scheme for establishing a Home Rule League. It was nearly accepted, but some disagreement arose, and time was asked for consideration. She waited nine months to give the Congress the fullest opportunity of adopting her scheme, but at last, in September 1916, launched it herself. At the same time another Home Rule League was established by Tilak; friendly relations were maintained between the two. The movement spread very rapidly from district to district, especially in the Madras Presidency, where her prestige was very high. The authorities had long been regarding her apprehensively, putting every obstacle in her path,

demanding securities for her newspapers, prohibiting her from entering certain areas; but she still continued to work hard, touring widely and strengthening the links by which she had brought together for her single purpose the opposed parties of the Congress and the Muslim League. Persecution she used cheerfully as advertisement; 'It all made propaganda,' she said, 'and educated the people to understand the benefits of bureaucratic rule.' Her evasion of the Press Law and subsequent haggling with the Government were worthy of Bradlaugh. In December 1916 her work was endorsed by the Congress and the Muslim League—meeting in united assembly at Lucknow—and the fresh vigour given to the agitation by this fact caused Lord Pentland, the Governor of Madras, to tell the Madras Legislative Council in May 1917 that 'all thoughts of the early grant of Responsible Self-Government must be put entirely out of mind'.

Mrs Besant was at this time acknowledged throughout India as one of the most influential leaders of advanced political thought, and when she attacked Lord Pentland for threatening repressive measures he decided to have done with her. Accordingly on June 16th he summoned her for an interview, presumably, she says, that she might take the opportunity of begging his mercy, for though he told her that she was to be interned he refused any explanation whatsoever.* When she asked for one, he replied: 'I cannot discuss that, Mrs Besant.' She pointed out, not without acerbity, that the authorities had promised that no one would be interned without a full statement of the offence committed. He replied again: 'I cannot discuss it, Mrs

* The official order stated that she was interned because 'there are reasonable grounds for believing that Mrs Annie Besant has acted and is about to act in a manner prejudicial to the public safety'.

Besant.' She asked what he wanted her to do, but his replies were vague, though he offered her a safe conduct to England if she would remain there for the duration of the War. She answered : ' It seems to me that as Your Excellency has no proposals to make and I have none, I am wasting Your Excellency's time. Will you permit me to take leave ? ' She continues her account : ' I arose and he walked with me to the door, and on his way he said, " I wish you to consider, Mrs Besant, that we cannot discriminate and the whole of your activities will be stopped." I said, " You have all the power and I am helpless, and you must do what you like. There is just one thing I should like to say to Your Excellency, and that is that I believe you are striking the deadliest blow against the British Empire in India." ' *

On the day preceding this interview, as soon as the summons was received, she had printed in *New India* a long message, a characteristic account of her position and an appeal to her fellow-workers not to be discouraged. In the course of it she said : ' What is my crime, that after a long life of work for others, publicly and privately, I am to be dropped into the modern equivalent of the Middle Age *oubliette*—internment ? My real crime is that I have awakened in India the national self-respect, which was asleep, and have made thousands of educated men feel that to be content with being " a subject race " is a dishonour. . . . Life does not consist in money and clothes, in motor-cars and invitations to Government Houses. Life consists in liberty, self-respect, in honour, in right ambition, in patriotism, and in noble living. Where these are absent, life is not worth living. It is not the life of a man, the image of God, but of a brute, well-fed by its owner. . . .

' I go into enforced silence and imprisonment because

* This account appeared in *The Hindu*. It has been reprinted in *Mrs Annie Besant : A Sketch of her Life*, *etc*, and elsewhere.

I love India and have striven to arouse her before it was too late. It is better to suffer than to consent to wrong. It is better to lose liberty than to lose honour.

'I am old, but I believe that I shall see India win Home Rule before I die. If I have helped ever so little to the realization of that glorious hope, I am more than satisfied.'

Her internment, together with that of B. P. Wadia, the assistant editor of *New India*, and G. S. Arundale, a leading contributor, followed immediately. They were offered a choice of several areas of confinement, and chose Ootacamund, one of the pleasantest spots in India, where she, as President of the Theosophical Society, had a house. No doubt she chafed at the enforced inactivity, but she knew that her work was being carried on by capable hands, and it was not long before she was free again. Lord Pentland had presented her with 'the laurel crown of martyrdom', and the instant consequence was a storm of protest which burst out all over India, supported by many who had hitherto held aloof, until its disturbing echoes were heard even in England and America. She had become more than a leader: she was a symbol. At this time, among the illiterate masses at least, she was referred to and venerated as 'the blue-throated'—a reference to the legend of a Hindu god who swallowed the world's evil (that is, took it upon himself); he did not die but his throat turned blue. By her internment she was supposed to have taken upon herself and purged the sins of India. 'Who would have thought,' one high official asked indignantly, 'that there would have been such a fuss about one old woman?' The agitation—a perfectly orderly one—continued unbroken through July and August, until the famous British Government Declaration of August 20th 1917 that 'the policy of His Majesty's Government, with which the Government of India are in complete accord, is that of the increasing

association of Indians in every branch of the administration and the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire. They have decided that substantial steps in this direction should be taken as soon as possible.' To this end Mr Edwin Montagu, the new Secretary of State for India, visited the country ' to learn the wishes of the people '. Upon September 17th Mrs Besant and her comrades were released upon giving an assurance to the Viceroy that they would assist in maintaining calmness and order during Mr Montagu's visit.

It was a victory for Mrs Besant's policy as for her planning. Whatever the facts, the appearance was one of crushing defeat inflicted upon the all-powerful autocracy. She returned to freedom more popular and more powerful than ever, and was elected * and presided as President over the National Congress which met that December in Calcutta, and was acclaimed again and again as India's champion. It was, politically, her moment of greatest triumph, but it was, unfortunately, to be little more than a moment. Mr Montagu was undoubtedly sympathetic towards the Indians ; he spent several months in India, where he was aided by a Viceroy of liberal instincts if not striking personality ; he interviewed many of the Indian leaders, including Mrs Besant. But the forces of reaction were by no means defeated, and, organized in 1918 as the Indo-British Association, they began to work for the prevention of effective reforms.

When in July 1918 the Montagu-Chelmsford Report

* The choice was made before her release. In her very long Presidential Address she reviewed the whole past and present, and her own and other critical and constructive suggestions, and stressed once more India's ' desire to remain within the Empire '. India, she declared, ' is no longer on her knees for boons ; she is on her feet for Rights. It is because I have taught this that the English in India misunderstand me, and call me seditious ; it is because I have taught this that I am President of this Congress to-day.'

was published, it was denounced by all parties in India as inadequate. Mainly three views prevailed, and these formed the basis of subsequent division. The Moderates accepted it, but urged important amendments; the Home Rulers declined to accept it, and urged amendments; the Extremists rejected it absolutely. Mrs Besant supported the Home Rulers. 'I find myself,' she said in 1918, 'unable to accept the Scheme as it stands. . . . The Scheme is penetrated with distrust of Indians, and the desire to keep all real power in the hands of Englishmen. . . . It is petty where it should have been large, banal where it should have been striking. There is about it no vision for India of even future evolution into freedom.' * She was, however, willing to do what she could to make Reforms workable even as they stood, but the 1918 Congress was captured by the Extremists. Then, early in 1919, came the repressive Rowlatt Act, passed for no apparent reason but a desire on the part of the official reactionaries to show their power. Its pure needlessness is clearly shown by the fact that, during all the troubles that followed, the Act was never once put into operation, and was finally removed from the Statute Book as worthless. It was effective only as an insult, and as such it was the cause of a passive resistance movement started by Gandhi in 1919. This was opposed by Mrs Besant, and as Gandhi's star rose so hers fell. She spent much of the year in England engaged in Home Rule propaganda.

The crisis came with the brutal administration of martial law in the Punjab, culminating in April in the terrible incident at Amritsar, where the late General Dyer ordered his troops to open fire upon an unarmed and unwarned gathering, personally directing the firing to the thickest parts of the crowd, and killing nearly 400 persons, besides wounding 1,200 more, whom he not only

* *Criticisms of the Montagu-Chelmsford Proposals.*

neglected but refused permission to others to tend. To make matters worse, the British business community in India with inconceivable stupidity raised for this valiant hero a purse of £30,000. The feeling may have been, as Mr Edward Thompson suggests* : 'This'll be a slap in the face for that fellow Montagu ! A Jew Secretary of State for India ! We'll show him what we think of his so-called Reforms ! ' The Indians took it, naturally, as a direct hit at themselves. All confidence in British promises was lost ; the work of years was undone in a few weeks ; more and more with every month power in the Nationalist parties passed into the hands of the Extremists. Mrs Besant saw the dangers of Gandhi's policy, and how inevitably it must—as it did—lead to strife and disorder ; she urged discretion, the need at this time above all for constitutional progress. But none would listen. Her own Home Rule League in 1919 rejected her as President in favour of Gandhi, who was now as completely leader of the Congress as she had been in 1917. Those who then shouted for her now ' yelled at her, tried to gag her in their National Congress and on public platforms, tried to hound her out of the field of politics '.† She was howled down, even hooted and hissed. At the Excelsior Theatre in Bombay she was refused a hearing. But she remained calm and cool, determined upon her course and following it without deviation. She opposed Gandhi in her papers, attacking ' the fatal policy of Non-Co-operation, which is daily becoming more and more violent ; if it be not checked by the resolute opposition of the thoughtful, it will crush the country by necessitating repression, or drive it into a welter of anarchy, a national suicide.' ‡ She gathered those about her who would work for the

* *The Other Side of the Medal.* This very valuable little book should be known to every student of Indian affairs.

† *Tributes to Dr Annie Besant.* ‡ *Gandhian Non-Co-operation.*

Reforms for what they were worth in the absence of anything better, believing that, as she wrote in 1922, 'it only needs a little patience and courage on the part of India to win Home Rule through the Reform Act.' * Unfortunately the movement of pure protest—of which even Gandhi had soon to admit he had lost control—has needed time to work itself out; still to-day the wounds have not been healed, and in particular the gulf between the Congress and the Muslim League, which Mrs Besant worked so hard and effectively to bridge, seems almost as wide as ever. But the tendency undoubtedly—and especially of recent months—is on every hand towards reunion, and for this in large part she must be given credit.

7

It was in 1923 that her returning influence began to be felt. Through the autumn of 1922 she was working in Simla, interviewing members of the Indian Legislature, then in session there, trying to bring them together in conference for the purpose of calling a Convention to frame a Constitution for India. Conferences were held in 1923 and 1924, the first Convention, of which she was elected General Secretary, in April 1924. 'It consisted of Members and ex-Members of the Legislatures, Central and Provincial (231), the Members of the Council of the National Home Rule League (19), the elected representatives of the Political Sections of the 1921 Clubs in Madras, Bombay, and Calicut (3), the co-opted representatives of the Indian Women's Association (2), and the late Law Member of the Governor-General's Council, 256 in all, and this Convention is responsible for the Commonwealth of India Bill.'†

* Quoted in *India : Bond or Free?*

† *India : Bond or Free?*

'It divided itself into seven Committees to deal with different sections of a Constitution establishing Self-Government, and directed them to report in the autumn of the same year. A draft was based on these reports, and the Convention sat in Bombay in December and considered and amended it. It printed the results and circulated them to political parties, inviting further amendments, and submitted the draft also to a sub-committee appointed by a Committee of all parties, presided over by Mr Gandhi in November 1924. This sub-committee made a number of amendments, and these with all others were submitted to the Convention sitting in Cawnpore on April 11th, 12th, and 13th 1925; it was finally submitted to a Drafting Committee in Madras, consisting of the Hon C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar, Messrs Shiva Rao, Sri Ram, Yadunandan Prasad, and Dr Annie Besant, with power to correct any oversights in language where necessary, to see the Bill through the press, and publish it in the name of the Convention.'*

In all these preparations Mrs Besant, 'that tireless servant of India', as Gandhi termed her, was continually active, and many of the principles she had long advocated are to be found set forth in the Bill, as in the following features:

'India will be placed on an equal footing with the Self-Governing Dominions, sharing their responsibilities and their privileges.

'The right of Self-Government will be exercised from the Village upwards in each successive autonomous area of wider extent—namely, the Taluka, the District, the Province, and India (excluding the Indian States). . . .

'The following fundamental rights will be guaranteed to every person: (*a*) Inviolability of the liberty of the person and of his dwelling and property; (*b*) Freedom of conscience and the free practice of religion, subject

* *India: Bond or Free?*

to public order or morality; (*c*) Free expression of opinion and the right of assembly, peaceably and without arms, and of forming associations or unions, subject to public order or morality; (*d*) Free Elementary Education as soon as practicable; (*e*) the use of roads, places dedicated to the public, Courts of Justice, and the like; (*f*) Equality before the law, irrespective of considerations of Nationality; (*g*) Equality of sexes.' *

In July 1925 Mrs Besant brought the Bill to England,† where in the House of Commons, introduced as a private Member's measure in December 1925 and again in January 1927, it received the active support of the Labour Party. For more than three years it stood as the first and only Constitution for India drawn up by responsible representatives in a National Convention, and is in itself a sufficient answer to those who asserted that India lacks national unity and that its leaders can produce no outline of an agreed Constitution. It received the assent of most of the parties, and Gandhi and his followers only held aloof because they believed that with the Ministers then in office 'nothing but the waste-paper basket is its destiny. . . . Let Lord Birkenhead publicly assure Dr Besant that her Bill will have every chance of acceptance if it is endorsed by Pandit Motilal Nehru, and others whom he may name, and I shall undertake to secure these signatures.' ‡ This challenge Lord Birkenhead, then Secretary of State for India, tactfully ignored, and the Simon Commission has remained equally silent.

Mrs Besant's effort, though she has never, even to-day, regained her height of triumph, was still for unanimity

* *Problem of India.*

† She had visited England in the previous August, on a mission to persuade the leaders of the Labour Party to help India to Self-Government. The Prime Minister (Mr Ramsay MacDonald) received a deputation, but in the absence of Liberal support could give only a cautious answer.

‡ Gandhi, quoted in *Problem of India.*

of purpose. 'Let us make the Congress National once more,' she appealed in May 1927 in a cable sent from London to the Indian Press: 'Let us forget the recent past and unite for the coming future. If the Bill now in the House of Commons does not please you, make another, and if that other gives you equal freedom with the Bill of 1925, I will be the first to tear up the older one and to welcome the new.'

She was actually in India again when, in November 1927, the constitution of the Statutory Commission under Sir John Simon was announced. At once she adopted a definite attitude, urging, in a series of speeches delivered during a rapid tour of Southern India, a National Boycott of the Commission as a reply to 'the Tory boycott of Indians as members,' and at the same time calling for a union of all parties to 'confront Great Britain—not the unwanted Commission—with a clearly formulated, definite, and united demand' for 'Self-Government and *nothing less*' on lines to be decided in general conference. In both directions she, in common with all but one or two of the Indian leaders, if not as completely successful as she and her followers claimed, was vastly more so than was acknowledged or known in England at that time. The appointment of the 'All-white' Commission had, it might be said, something of the effect of her internment ten years before, the re-entry of Gandhi into politics being only one of its consequences.

Throughout 1928, while in India, she did not relax her labours for unity. From the first she appealed for 'a single Bill, to be sent up to Parliament as India's demand.' In February she attended at Delhi the first meetings of the All-Parties' Conference which, being determined to accept no compromise upon the issue of 'full responsible government,' incorporated in its preliminary report some parts of the Commonwealth of India Bill, and inaugurated the series of discussions which resolved many

difficulties and led to the appointment in May, following a motion by Mrs Besant, of the Nehru Committee to determine the principles of the Constitution for India. In June she sailed for Europe, succumbed to serious illness in July, but by August 28th was back again in India and attending the Lucknow Conference convened to consider the Nehru Report, which, after some dissent, was adopted as a whole. Subsequently she spoke publicly in Lucknow, Benares, Bombay, Poona and other cities in favour of the new Constitution, which accepts many of the principles of the Commonwealth of India Bill, but differs in demanding in many details a more immediate independence, and in not stressing the importance given in the earlier Bill to the village as the basic Indian social and political unit. In December the National Congress, meeting at Calcutta, also endorsed the Nehru Report, but went further; and once more, as in 1919, she spoke unavailingly against Gandhi when he moved a resolution that should the British Government not have accepted in its entirety, by the end of 1929, the Dominion Status Constitution drafted by the Nehru Committee, the Congress would organize a non-cooperation movement, with non-payment of taxes. He prevailed, and it was left to her only to denounce his political incapacity, not mincing her words, and to put her faith in what the intervening twelve months may bring forth. She does not despair. The Masters have assured her that Dominion Status for India is part of the Great Plan, and she knows that she 'will not pass away until that freedom is established.'*

India stands more strongly to-day than ever for independence. The success of the hartal and boycott was unanimously minimized by the British Press, as has been, indeed, Mrs Besant's part in the whole matter. Her work for India has never received—it certainly does not

* *Theosophist*, October 1928.

receive to-day—adequate appreciation in England, very largely, one must admit, because she has persistently made it her deliberate policy to give the credit of her work to Indians, striving thus to arouse in them self-confidence and a sense of responsibility.

For fifteen years at least she had held the balance between the hot-headed and the faint-hearted factions, basing her political policy upon a sane recognition of Indian actualities. If India, when at last it gains that right of freedom that not even British blindness can much longer deny it, chooses to remain within the Empire, then to Mrs Besant—one might almost say to Mrs Besant alone—will the credit be due. To-day, at more than eighty years of age, her statesmanlike vision is no less clear than of old.

The fact that a woman, who has completed eighty years of this mortal life, should be still hard at work seems to have much interested the English press, and notices that should have been obituaries have appeared in very many papers. For the most part they are very kindly.

Annie Besant in *New India*
November 3rd 1927

VII

ANNIE BESANT TO-DAY

I

UPON JULY 23RD 1924 a crowded meeting was held in the Queen's Hall, London to mark Annie Besant's completion of fifty years of public work. It was attended by representatives of almost every branch of progressive endeavour, social, religious, and political; the majority were from parts of the British Isles, but some came from Europe, America, and even India. Several well-known public figures were present; among the speakers were George Lansbury, Ben Tillett, Ben Turner, Margaret Bondfield, Mrs Pethick Lawrence, and John Scurr; messages were read from Lord Haldane, Ramsay MacDonald, and Philip Snowden, and Bernard Shaw and others paid tribute in print to her work, as socialist, politician, reformer, educationist, and religious teacher. Few in that audience, perhaps could endorse without misgiving her activities in every field, but all recognized the unfailing courage, the noble sincerity, the spirit of self-sacrifice, the sympathy for the suffering and oppressed, the hatred of injustice, which have informed her labours since the seventies. It was a unique tribute to a unique personality, a remarkable tribute to the most remarkable of living women.

Yet 1925 held still in store for her an event even more —to her, vastly more—memorable and stirring. Following the preliminary 'overshadowing' of the body of the 'vehicle' by the World Teacher in 1911, there came a necessary period of waiting. For one thing, it was essential that the body of Krishnamurti should be 'carefully trained in purity of life', and its adequacy

tested. The process of occupation of the vehicle by 'the One Whom we know as the World Teacher, the Lord Maitreya, the Bodhisattva, the Christ, whatever name you give Him' was evidently no easy one, as Mrs Besant has explained: 'I must ask you for a moment to try to imagine—we can, none of us, really dream, what the consciousness of the World Teacher is; remember He hears every prayer addressed to Him, from every faith, from every longing and devoted heart; His consciousness is omnipresent, not only for our world but for other worlds as well: that consciousness responds, the people of every religion can bear testimony to that. And if you ask me how such a consciousness can occupy a physical body, and what will be its conditions when thus occupied, my answer is: "I do not know." Who am I, who is anyone, to say what the consciousness can do and what it cannot? . . . All I can say is that some fragment of the Mighty Consciousness will take up its abode in a body chosen, out of which has passed for the time all consciousness normally present in it, leaving only the physical consciousness, which is subconscious, remaining. That is one way in which it may be taken possession of, but there are many other possibilities. The one that we know as Krishnamurti will step out, as he (Krishnamurti) does every night in his sleep, and I presume will remain ready—being the whole consciousness except the physical expression of it—and a fragment of the Great Consciousness will occupy that physical body. . . . I imagine, but this is only my imagination, that such a manifestation will take place more and more continuously as the body becomes able to face the enormous strain, because we know that the strain is terrible even for a moment or two of such inhabitation.' *

But the time of waiting was also, for those intimately

* *How a World Teacher Comes.*

concerned, one of gathering certitude; what Mrs Besant at first only believed she came presently, she declared, to know. Between 1911 and 1925, when the first momentary occupation is said to have taken place, the body of Krishnamurti was apparently overshadowed more than once. There could no longer be doubts as to the vehicle chosen. It became known that, owing to the state of crisis prevailing in the world, the Coming was to be hastened, and for this the Great War was regarded, on Mrs Besant's authority, as a partial preparation. Hundreds of thousands of superior quality souls were needed for the building of the new sub-race —mentioned before as already appearing in California— and in battle were taken 'the very cream of the European nations', purified by sacrifice, to be born again upon earth after a period of suitable instruction. It became known presently that the World Teacher was actually living in this world, in the Himalayas, for Mrs Besant and others had visited Him there—while their bodies, be it added, were 'wrapt in sleep'. 'I could not tell you in what part of the Himalayas He lives,' she admitted, 'because there are several parts of it from which the same view of the great plains is possible. He lives there in a very beautiful garden and looks over the plains of Northern India. A very large number of people are able to see Him there, and to hear Him.' But the body he uses in this secluded home is 'far too fine and delicate to be subjected to the rough and tumble life down here', needing to withstand its violent contacts too tremendous an expenditure of spiritual power; therefore the vehicle remains a necessity. All these things, and others—for example, that the twelve chosen apostles include Mrs Besant, Leadbeater, Jinarajadasa, and Bishop and Mrs Arundale—are known, because, as Mrs Besant has declared, 'I have heard the Christ say so'.*

* *How a World Teacher Comes.*

Nevertheless, when beneath 'the great Banyan Tree' at Adyar, upon the morning of December 28th 1925, during the jubilee celebrations of the fiftieth Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society, the World Teacher 'spoke for the first time in our lower world for some two thousand years' through the mouth of His vehicle, the great event seems to have come unexpectedly. Indeed, according to Mrs Besant, 'only a few of us realized what had happened'.* 'Krishnamurti was speaking,' she relates, 'and it was evident that he was under very strong influence at the moment before he was taken possession of entirely, and I will read what he was saying, because it shows the influence that was then playing upon him. He had been speaking about the World Teacher: "We are all expecting Him, Who is the Example, Who is the embodiment of nobility. He will be with us soon, He *is* with us now. He comes to lead us all to that perfection where there is eternal happiness; He comes to lead us, and He comes to those who have not understood, who have suffered, who are unhappy, who are unenlightened. He comes to those who want, who desire, who long——" The speaker started, stopped a moment, and then another voice rang out through his lips, a voice not heard on earth for two thousand years:

'"I come to those who want sympathy,
Who want happiness;
Who are longing to be released;
Who are longing to find happiness in all things.
I come to reform and not to tear down;
Not to destroy, but to build."

'Those were the words that rang out above a crowd of some six thousand people. Some only saw a great light,

* *New York World*, August 22nd 1926.

some saw the Christ Himself, all heard the Voice. And that is one of the reasons why some of us are speaking so plainly about His coming, for that was to us, as it were, the birth of the Christ, His coming into the world, although only for a few moments, a reporter taking the words down at the time.' *

Following this incident the World Teacher 'possessed Krishnaji's (Krishnamurti's) body several times, although not at public gatherings. There is every reason to believe that these periods of possession will grow longer in duration and will come more frequently. The time when the World Teacher will take continuous possession of Krishnaji's body is not far off.' †

It was in August 1926, at the annual camp gathering of the Order of the Star in the East at Ommen in Holland (upon the Eerde Estate, of some 5,000 acres and including Castle Eerde, given to the Order by a Dutch follower of Krishnamurti) that the second public manifestation occurred. Here is the account of 'a retired officer, thirty-seven years in a crack British military regiment': 'It happened at the evening camp fire, while Krishnamurti spoke of the good life. I suddenly felt an overwhelming impulse to remove my hat reverently. I noticed the men in front doing the same. . . . I was conscious that another voice than Krishnamurti's was speaking. The voice used old English, which Krishnamurti has never done. This continued for four or five minutes, then Krishnamurti sat down. I was conscious of the utter stillness. Not only the two thousand pilgrims but the very insects in the trees, were quiet, and even the fire stopped crackling. We felt we had all become parts of one great body. I should judge

* *How a World Teacher Comes.* Was it the words, so 'excessively platitudinous' as Arnold Bennett describes them, that blinded all but 'a few' to the significance of this apparently obvious incident—or was it that the obviousness grew as the significance was realized?

† *New York World*, August 22nd 1926.

the silence lasted ten or fifteen minutes.' * Another witness, a Cambridge physicist, who had been 'experimenting with a microscope so that his eyesight is specially trained, declared he saw a "huge star over Krishnamurti's head burst into fragments and come raining down. For an instant I thought I was back in France".' † Similar phenomena were repeated on following nights, and later Mrs Besant stated that 'it was a fact that during this camp the World Teacher has several times used his vehicle'. Returning to their homes all about the world the members of the Order spread the message that 'the time of waiting is over. The Teacher has come'.

At the 1927 Ommen camp gathering Krishnamurti—accompanied, as always, by Mrs Besant—was for the first time 'publicly received as one speaking with authority'.‡ Later, landing in India in October, the attainment of a further stage was announced: 'I have seen Buddha,' he is reported as saying, 'I have communed with Buddha, I am Buddha; and the message I bring to India is to be pure in mind, emotion, and body.' (Alas, platitudes again!) 'I am no longer Krishnamurti. I have renounced everything. I could have been a rich man and was offered £2,000 a week by American cinema firms, but, of course, I turned it down. Like a river which fell into the sea, I have lost myself in the eternal.' §

These incidents, accepted by Mrs Besant at their fullest value, have meant for her no slackening but an intensifying of effort. Each coming of the World Teacher, she has taught, must coincide with the first building-up of a new civilization, and to the foundation of such a civilization, to its religion, its economics, its

* *New York World*, August 3rd 1926. † *Ibid.*

‡ *Daily Herald*, August 12th 1927.

§ *Daily Express*, October 28th 1927. I quote this account because I can come across no other, although frankly there seems to me as much *Daily Express* as Krishnamurti in it

social forms based upon brotherhood, to the creation of the conditions in which its seeds may be sown, her later lectures and writings have, under the orders of her Masters, been devoted. One of her efforts is towards the establishment of a world university, with centres at Ommen, Sydney, and Adyar; the Dutch centre has already been established. Another scheme is at present in progress to acquire land in the beautiful Ojai Valley in California, and there to set up 'a miniature model of the New Civilization, in which bodies, emotions, and minds shall be trained and disciplined in daily life into health, poise, and high intelligence, fit dwellings for the Divine Life, developing the spirit of Brotherhood practically in everyday arrangements and methods of living'.* It will also serve as a Theosophical centre where both Krishnamurti and Mrs Besant will then spend a portion of each year. 'We have already begun road-making and soon will line the roads with trees. In our Happy Valley . . . we have begun by saying that every industry carried out there must be co-operative.' Upon this venture Mrs Besant is 'risking'—trusting her Masters, she uses the word scoffingly—'a reputation based on nearly fifty-three years of public work and all my financial future, when I might, without discredit, at nearly eighty years of age, have what the world would call an easy and a pleasant life. And I do it joyfully'.† Joyfully, indeed, for hers is a great faith—a faith, moreover, which grows by what it feeds on.

In August and September 1927 she gave a characteristic display of enterprise and energy by making an aeroplane tour of Europe, in twenty-one days visiting thirteen countries and delivering fifty-six Theosophical lectures. Upon her return to London she expressed her regret that it was impossible for her to fly back to India.

Some time previously, knowing that the World

* *The New Civilization.* † *Ibid.*

Teacher would soon take possession of his vehicle, Mrs Besant had begged the permission of the Masters to give up all her duties in connection with politics and the Theosophical Society in order to follow Him. It was refused, and in the summer of 1928 she was re-elected to the presidency of the Society, for a fourth septennial term, practically without dissent, 'an absolutely overwhelming vote of confidence in our great Leader and President, Warrior and Mother.'* She had already announced in March the coming of the World Mother, and the preparatory initiation of a divinely inspired world-movement 'for the uplift of Motherhood', with a young Indian girl, Rukmini Devi (Mrs G. S. Arundale), at its head. That summer she visited Europe, but while in London was taken so seriously ill that she was forced to cancel all her remaining engagements, including her visit to Ommen, and it was suggested even in high Theosophical circles that she might be compelled for the future to abandon her work as a public speaker and organizer. Nevertheless, by the end of August, when she arrived in India, she had sufficiently recovered to look forward to her new term as president with equanimity, and to embark upon the political activities already described. Her plans for the present year, to be devoted principally to India, but with excursions to America and Europe, certainly do not suggest retirement. She is evidently rising towards, not declining from, the climax of her astounding career.

2

To meet Mrs Besant personally is to make the acquaintance of a most charming elderly white-haired woman, quietly assertive, who chats easily and with

* *Theosophist*, July 1928.

complete assurance—as of the latest political speech, or the newest novel—of matters so utterly incredible as not even to be dreamed of in the average person's philosophy. (Not that she forces such subject upon one ; for herself she knows about it all, she knows, she *knows*, and that is sufficient for her, but she answers all questions most patiently.) Had one to select an outstanding quality in her it would be, probably, this perfect confidence in herself ; it is the secret of both her efficiency and her enthusiasm. For criticism she cares little, for she has no doubts ; she has always been able to live very fully in her world of the moment with complete certainty. She lacks neither friendliness nor humour, she has the power of putting the most nervous visitor instantly at his ease, yet it is impossible to forget in her presence that she inhabits more spacious—and more imperative—regions than our own.

She is a fundamentally healthy person ; a vegetarian, and abstainer from both alcohol and tobacco. At every period of her life her not least striking quality has been her astonishing energy, and to-day she rests as little as ever upon her laurels. Each morning she is up, it is said, well before six o'clock, and with scarcely a pause even for meals works hard all day writing and directing, in the evening often lecturing, and retiring late. She moves easily, firmly, energetically, and her slight stoop suggests study rather than age ; she dresses simply, wholly in white, in a robe of soft Indian silk, with a few emblematic jewels, a large crystal and a ring for her only ornaments. Her features are lined, but her gaze is singularly direct, the straight lips are firmly set. Here, one realizes at once, is a woman accustomed to dominate.

Upon the platform she can be a very impressive figure. She practised, by all accounts, in pre-War years a more fervid oratory than we are accustomed to hear to-day, even from her. When speaking in public now she stands

for the most part almost motionless, her hands resting lightly upon the brass rail before her ; she speaks calmly, in level tones, and with no gestures at all. Only occasionally, and so the more effectively, the old passion, the old resonant emotion, comes back into the voice for a brief sentence or two . . . then as suddenly she returns to her conversational manner. Her voice is always, after the first few sentences, marvellously clear and penetrating, but never more so than her treatment of her subject. She leads up to it by progressive steps of luminous explanation, pointed by the wise and often ironical comments of one who has seen the failure of many movements and the defeat of many hopes, expounds it briefly and definitely (she is always definite), and comes quickly to her conclusion. In her it is no echo of a great lecturer to which we listen, but a great lecturer who has adapted herself to circumstances and so retains undimmed the elements of greatness.

She has in the last sixty years been called many names ; she has also received the tributes of numerous great men and women who could accept none of her views. For my own part, approaching the subject without preconceptions (whatever value there may be in my opinion lies in its impartiality), while I am opposed to most of her beliefs and not a small number of her activities, I do feel that the least that can be said of her is that her life has been a quest not for pleasure or for comfort or to satisfy ambition, but primarily for *truth*. She may have been mistaken at all times and upon every point, for as W. Q. Judge said long ago (he was referring to her), ' Sincerity does not of itself confer knowledge, much less wisdom ' ; nevertheless her belief in that for which she worked has always been indubitable. She has been, moreover, always spurred onward by a great impulse, not for personal gain but to serve others. ' This only is worth living for,' she declares in a passage which might be

paralleled any number of times in her works, ' that the world may be better because we have been living in it ; this only is the one crown of humanity—that the man crowns himself with thorns in order that others may be crowned with life immortal.' She may have acted often, as William Morris suggested, as an opportunist, taking whatever means offered to gain her ends, and justifying them subsequently as best she could, but, as he recognized too, ' she really is a good woman '. Her greatness may still abide our question ; her goodness, I think, is not to be disputed. Like all genuine prophets and reformers she has been upon occasion ruthless in her methods, but she has sacrificed no one as she has sacrificed herself.

What then of her future—that is to say, her future fame ? In a hundred or five hundred years, what will her reputation be ? One ardent admirer has applied to her the familiar words :

> Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
> Her infinite variety.

They are in themselves appropriate enough, and the association is not without a charming incongruity. But inevitably they force the query : Is it probable that the name of Annie Besant will survive as long as that of Cleopatra ? There can be no possible doubt, which has given more to the world of moral worth, as an example of industry and righteousness, as an ideal to be followed, in actual achievement for the welfare of others. And yet . . . There is, it must be admitted, at least an uncertainty. I have already tried to sum up elsewhere,* from this point of view, her achievement as pioneer, spiritual pilgrim and personality. I have nothing to add to that summary, and can only quote it

* *Mrs Annie Besant* (Representative Women Series). I quote these passages with the publisher's consent.

here, with a few alterations and omissions, as my considered opinion :

What must be our estimate of her, then, as pilgrim ? As a great spirit shattering the bonds of time and place, finding no agony of body or spirit sufficient to turn her aside from her quest of an Eternal Truth. Alas, it is here not enough to be brave—one may still be mistaken. Mrs Besant appears to many to have shared with Booth and Stead—to mention two of her contemporaries—an overwhelming instinct and desire for religion together with inadequate equipment for its apprehension, lacking those sensitive refinements of the spiritual nature which alone give hope of victory. The religious heart is, unfortunately, no warrant of the religious soul. Mrs Besant, no doubt, regards Theosophy as her final triumph ; by that alone, Theosophists will say, her name must be carried to posterity—they are of course in the fortunate position of *knowing* that their religion is to prosper unfailingly. We, however, in our ignorance, can only wonder. Is Theosophy to be the—or even a—world-religion of the future ? It seems doubtful, for while Theosophy becomes increasingly a religion of authority, the tendency of the West, and eventually of the world, is to the Protestant spirit, the assertion of the free individual for whom faith and being are one, for whom, as Keyserling phrases it, the time of external exponents is over. Theosophists claim that their teachings have permeated modern thought in every direction, and are directly responsible for modernism in religion, the rejection of literal interpretation of the Bible, the study by the clergy of comparative religion, the prevailing liberty of thought, and general tolerance in religion. Science, they say, has been profoundly affected, and one result may be seen in the wide recognition of psychic research as a legitimate object of serious inquiry.

William James is said to have been influenced by Theosophical ideas, and it is asserted not only that many ideas in philosophy are derived or adapted from Eastern teachings brought West by Madame Blavatsky, but that many discoveries in physics, etc, were anticipated in the pages of *The Secret Doctrine*. Yet the claims seem absurdly exaggerated; the beginnings of all these influences and impulses were discernible before the Theosophical Society came into existence; perhaps it has helped—it can scarcely be said to have originated. Mrs Besant, it has already been suggested, has been since Madame Blavatsky's death the living centre of the Society; it has under her Presidency gone forward from strength to strength, to prosperity and influence—only time, though, can show whether without her it can preserve its position. For herself, whatever its fate, it appears undeniable that in Theosophy Mrs Besant has increasingly rejected her earlier ideals, denied what, at her most masculine, her most modern, her most significant, she stood for. If the criticism* of Theosophy is to be accepted, then it must be accepted too that the spiritual pilgrimage of Mrs Besant has by her own highest ideals ended in spiritual failure. If she is right she is magnificently and utterly right; if wrong, then the magnitude of her error is more likely to draw her with it into oblivion.

What then as personality? In herself she is, it is apparent, a woman of overwhelming personality, yet even as such, though her fellow-workers seem unable to express adequately their admiration, she appears to have made little impression upon her contemporaries in general, to have appealed scarcely at all to their imaginations. Of her greatness as an orator there can be no doubt—though it might be truer to call her a public speaker, for she has always been primarily a propagandist.

* See Appendix.

It is difficult to imagine that many of her speeches will be read in future years for their own sake, as literature. Their matter is everything, their manner nothing, they are contributions to controversy rather than to knowledge, and when the dust of their particular conflict drifts to earth they will lie—as many of them already do—forgotten beneath it. Something the same may be said of her voluminous writings; he must needs be a hardy soul who, save as a student, essays to read them. Style she has never had, and though haste may account for the formless sentences and paragraphs to be found occasionally in her work, it is difficult to reconcile them with the smallest degree of literary intention or feeling. At her best she can express herself straightforwardly, with admirable directness, yet even her *Autobiography*, which of all her writings possesses the greatest general interest, must be read for its tale rather than for its telling. Its significance, that is to say, is all on the surface, in its plainer facts; it is useless to seek below for deeper meaning. There is in its pages no hidden harmony, no voice of the soul, no secret beauty.

Is not this the lack which runs throughout? Which helps to account for one's ultimate feeling that, gifted as undoubtedly she is, she is possibly less gifted than a superficial study of her achievements might suggest? Is it not that what talents she has possessed she has always controlled with a skill and completeness amounting to genius, and always directly and forcefully to a single end? She has been at all times utterly sincere, utterly certain of her cause, of its rightness, its nobility, its triumph; at all times she has looked steadfastly forward, made at every change the cleanest of cuts with the entanglements of the past. All these things make for the utmost efficiency, but they no more indicate richness of personality than they do spiritual power. It might be suggested that she probably has more in common with,

say, Mr Henry Ford than with such teachers as Gautama and Jesus. She herself is to be found, to an unusual degree, in her work, and she must be estimated, again to an unusual degree, by the tangible results of her labours.

We return to her as pioneer. Her work there, her life-long battle for freedom of thought and speech, for truth and for enlightenment, in politics and in religion, in England and in India, certainly will stand; it has already become part of history. Yet very largely it is arguable even here that she originated nothing, gave nothing to the world which otherwise it must have lacked but which now is its imperishable heritage, that what she did was simply—*it is a great service*—to hasten processes already existing. The modern spirit would have come to birth without her, even had it been born more difficultly, after delay. She has been in this respect rather an assistant than a creator; she has added to the sum total of progress only relatively, and though her immortality in her work can be considered assured, it is not unlikely to be an anonymous immortality.

For herself, she leaves no distinctive body of writings, no vitally original thought, to carry on her name. As a phenomenon of sheer energy, of unfailing courage, of noble sincerity, she will live always in the memories of all who have known her; her fame beyond that point, considering her present position, seems curiously problematical.

So have I attempted to summarize my impressions. And yet . . . ? One writer at least has suggested that a woman who has lived so publicly and so dramatically, who has been always heroic, astonishing, and picturesque, must surely find some day a poet or inspired biographer to engrave her name upon the national memory. Certainly that may be so, for here is indeed a story which, realized as a whole, appeals to the imagination. When

that biography comes to be written it must, like this—which makes no claim to be more than tentative—be impartial, seeing her story as far as possible as pure drama. Her life has been, above all things, a great adventure ; it has been too, despite some things, a noble one. Well may a passage from her essay on Auguste Comte, written in the eighties, be applied to herself :

'He may have been either right or wrong in his opinions ; his speculations as philosopher, as religionist, as social reformer, are justly open to approval, to criticism, to reprobation ; each individual has a right to form his own opinion on the work ; but the worker himself should be reverently spoken of, and should be criticized without malice and without prejudice. . . . His tender heart, his earnest and disinterested labour, his laborious and self-sacrificing life, his pure and noble character—these are his titles to the admiration and homage of the Humanity he loved so well. Surely the race whose dignity he laboured to raise, whose toil he strove to cheer, whose woes he sought to lighten, should at least read him before they condemn. Some generous attention is due at least to him, who might have raised himself to power and to affluence if he had turned his mighty talents to his own ends, but who chose, instead, to dedicate every power to serve mankind, and who took as the motto of his life, "*Vivre pour autrui*".'

APPENDIX

THEOSOPHY: A SUMMARY AND A CRITICISM

THEOSOPHY IS, perhaps primarily, a body of knowledge. It presents a complete universe as background to its ethics and its psychology. I propose not so much to enter into this complicated cosmos as simply to turn a telescope, inadequate possibly but not (I trust) distorting, temporarily upon it to discern its outlines, implications, and tendencies. Those avid of detail may study elsewhere to their hearts' content whole libraries of books and pamphlets.

Extremely definite is this universe, in outline as in detail. Theosophists like to quote five dogmas as the main spiritual verities of religion; they may be taken at least as the basic doctrines of Theosophy:

'1. One eternal infinite incognizable real Existence.

'2. From THAT the manifested God, unfolding from unity to duality, from duality to trinity.

'3. From the manifested Trinity many spiritual Intelligences, guiding the cosmic order.

'4. Man a reflection of the manifested God, and therefore a trinity fundamentally, his inner and real Self being eternal, one with the Self of the universe.

'5. His evolution by repeated incarnations, into which he is drawn by desire, and from which he is set free by knowledge and sacrifice, becoming divine in potency as he had ever been divine in latency.' *

Upon these bases all is constructed. The One Existence is eternal and infinite; there is neither beginning nor end, though there is change. The One Existence, the Absolute Being, breathes out (or, to use another metaphor, dreams), and the universe comes into being; he draws in his breath (or ceases to dream), and the universe is reabsorbed, ceasing to exist as such,

* *Ancient Wisdom.*

though the memory of it (Maya) dwells on in the Eternal Consciousness. The breath, the dream, the individual manifestation is termed a Manvantara, and is presided over by an individual manifested God, or Logos. 'In the All exists simultaneously all that has been, all that is, all that can be, in one Eternal Present. In this fullness arises a VOICE which is a WORD, a LOGOS, God making Himself manifest. That WORD separates out, from the All, such Ideas as He selects for His future universe, and arranges them within Himself according to His Will; He limits Himself by His own thought, thus creating the "Ring-Pass-Not" of the universe-to-be—whether Solar System, congery of Solar Systems, congery of congeries, etc.' * Within this voluntarily limited sphere 'the universe is born, is evolved, and dies; it lives, it moves, it has its being in Him; its matter is His emanation; its forces and energies are currents of His life; He is immanent in every atom, all-pervading, all-sustaining, all-evolving; He is its source and its end, its cause and its object, its centre and circumference; it is built on Him as its sure foundation, it breathes in Him as its encircling space; He is in everything and everything in Him. Thus have the Sages of the Ancient Wisdom taught us of the beginning of the manifested world.'†

The Logos, Word, Ishvara, is one, but manifests in three forms. 'From the same source we learn of the Self-unfolding of the LOGOS into a three-fold form; the First LOGOS, the Root of all Being; from Him the Second, manifesting the two aspects of Life and Form, the primal duality, making two poles of nature between which the web of the universe is to be woven—Life-Form, Spirit-Matter, Positive-Negative, Active-Receptive, Father-Mother of the worlds. Then the Third LOGOS, the Universal Mind, that in which all archetypically exists, the source of beings, the fount of fashioning energy, the treasure-house in which are stored up all the archetypal forms which are to be brought forth and elaborated in lower kinds of matter during the evolution of the universe. These are the fruits of past universes, brought over as seeds for the present.'‡ Each Manvantara, that is to say, has for capital at its beginning the accumulated memories (Maya) of all past Manvantaras; this capital might, by the vulgar mind, be presumed to increase with each succeeding manifestation, were it

* *Theosophy.* † *Ancient Wisdom.* ‡ *Ibid.*

not that since there was never a first breath, dream, manifestation (as there can never be a last) the series is already infinite.

Ishvara has three aspects and three functions. As the Third Logos (Brahma) he pours into the universe seven successive vibratory waves of matter, or Tanmatras, in order of decreasing intensity, the two highest of which are even beyond naming, which the lower five are labelled respectively Nirvanic, Buddhic, Mental, Astral and Physical. As each wave emanates from Ishvara it passes outward through those which have preceded it, partaking of their nature and at the same time diluting them in such a way that the final consequence is a universe composed of seven planes and forty-nine sub-planes of matter. These planes, for clarity of exposition, are frequently figured after the fashion of geological strata, but Mrs Besant explains that 'rather are they concentric interpenetrating spheres, not separated from each other by distance but by difference of constitution. As air permeates water, as ether permeates the densest solid, so does astral matter permeate all physical.'*

This cosmic operation completed, comes the turn of the Second Logos (Vishnu). 'The second great life-wave from the Logos gave the impulse to the evolution of form, and He became the organizing force of His universe, countless hosts of entities, entitled Builders, taking part in the building up of forms out of combinations of spirit-matter. The life of the Logos abiding in each form is its central, controlling and directing energy. This building of forms on the higher planes cannot here be conveniently studied in detail; it may suffice to say that all forms exist as Ideas in the mind of the Logos, and that in this second life-wave these were thrown outwards as models to guide the Builders.'† The unit of 'outpoured life', or Monad, descends through the seven planes, from the highest (the 'greatly beyond the nirvanic' plane) to the physical. This process of involution is complicated, and is never fully explained; the essential point is that in the descent 'the Monad has drawn round itself materials of the planes through which it has descended' ‡ to the lowest depths of the physical (mineral), thus acquiring the latent potentialities that in the subsequent evolutionary phase are to become active powers. For the final depth attained the ascent begins forth-

* *Ancient Wisdom.* † *Ibid.* ‡ *Ibid.*

with. 'From this time forward the awakened energies of the Monad play a less passive part in evolution. They begin to seek expression actively to some extent when once aroused into functioning and to exercise a distinctly moulding influence over the forms in which they are imprisoned. As they become too active for their mineral embodiment, the beginnings of the more plastic forms of the vegetable kingdom manifest themselves, the nature-spirits aiding this evolution through the physical kingdom.'* In the vegetable stage progress becomes swifter: 'By their repeated plant-incarnations the monadic group-souls in the vegetable kingdom evolve, until those that ensoul the highest members of the kingdom are ready for the next step. This step carries them into the animal kingdom, and here they slowly evolve in their physical and astral vehicles a very distinct personality. The animal, being free to move about, subjects itself to a greater variety of conditions than can be experienced by the plant, rooted to a single spot, and this variety, as ever, promotes differentiation.' †

At this stage comes an important intervention, a third life-wave pouring forth from the First Logos (Mahadeva), the human Monad for the first time entering the scheme of things and descending to unite with the 'upwardly evolving monad of form'. All life, Theosophy declares, possesses consciousness; the human Monad brings Self-Consciousness. 'To avoid a possible misapprehension it may be as well to say that there were not henceforth two Monads in man—the one that had built the human tabernacle, and the one that descended into that tabernacle, and whose lowest aspect was the human soul. To borrow a simile again from H. P. Blavatsky, as two rays of the sun may pass through a hole in a shutter, and mingling together form but one ray though they have been twain, so is it with these rays from the supreme Sun, the divine Lord of our universe. A second ray, as it entered into the human tabernacle, blended with the first, merely adding to it fresh energy and brilliance, and the human Monad, *as a unit*, began its mighty task of unfolding the higher powers in man of that divine Light whence it came.' ‡ The human Monads are, incidentally, 'souls' still in course of evolution 'brought over' from other worlds, another cosmos.

* *Ancient Wisdom.* † *Ibid.* ‡ *Ibid.*

Yet with the appearance of humanity the ascent has but begun ; there are potential faculties to be developed, vehicles of the physical, etheric, astral and mental bodies to be ' brought into harmonious working order ', until ' in the fourth stage of consciousness that One is seen, and with the transcending of the barriers set up by the intellect the consciousness spreads out to embrace the world, seeing all things in itself and as parts of itself, and seeing itself as a ray of the Logos, and therefore as one with Him. Where is then the Thinker ? He has become Consciousness, and, while the spiritual Soul can at will use any of his lower vehicles, he is no longer limited to their use, nor needs them for this full and conscious life. Then is compulsory reincarnation over and the man has destroyed death ; he has verily achieved immortality.' *

With reincarnation we come to a cardinal dogma of Theosophy. So vast and prolonged is the process of evolution through even the three lower stages (physical, astral, mental) that, thinks Mrs Besant, ' the obvious necessity for many lives in which to experience them, if he is to evolve at all, may carry to the more thoughtful mind the clearest conviction of the truth of reincarnation '. The process, as carried on in accordance with Karma, ' the great law of causation ', she very simply describes : ' A human Spirit, a germinal life, enters the babe of a savage ; he has scarcely any intelligence, no moral sense ; he lives there for some forty or fifty years, dominated by desires, robs, murders, finally is murdered. He passes into the intermediate world, meets many old enemies, suffers, sees dimly that his body was murdered as a result of murdering others, comes to a vague conclusion unfavourable to murder ; this is very faintly impressed on his consciousness ; he enjoys the results of any dawning love he may have felt ; he comes back a trifle more " knowledgeable " than at first birth. This is repeated over and over again, till he has gradually but definitely arrived at conclusions that murder and theft and other such actions cause unhappiness, and love and kindness cause happiness ; he has thus acquired a conscience, though there is not much of it, and it is easily overborne by any strong desire. The interval between births is at first very short, but it gradually lengthens as his thought-power increases, until

* *Ancient Wisdom.*

the regular round of the three worlds is established ; in the first he gathers experience ; in the second he suffers for his mistakes, in the third he enjoys the outcome of his good thoughts and emotions, and here also he works the whole of his good mental and moral experiences into mental and moral faculties ; in this heavenly world, further, he studies his past life, and his sufferings, due to his mistakes, bring him knowledge, and thus power. " Every pain that I suffered in one body became a power which I wielded in the next." His stay in the third world increases in length and richness of yield as he progresses. At last he approaches the term of his long pilgrimage ; he enters the Path, passes through the great Initiations, and reaches human perfection. For him Reincarnation is over, for he has spiritualized matter for his own use, and while he may wear it, it cannot blind or rule him.'*

Here we have, so to speak, the stage and the play which perpetually takes place upon it. The scene we have still to set—and it too is complicated ! To confine attention to our Solar System alone, seven planets are said to be in manifestation—Vulcan, Venus, Earth, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune. These seven planets constitute a Field of Evolution, and life passes from one planetary Chain to another in orderly progression. ' Seven stages must be passed through, so seven the Chains will be ; three Chains in which Spirit will be descending ; one Chain, the fourth, in which Spirit and Matter will be interlinking and interweaving and forming innumerable relations ; then three Chains of upward climbing, at the end of which all shall return into the bosom of the Planetary Logos, to emerge into Ishvara with the fruitage of evolution.' † In the Solar System the Earth Chain is the fourth, and to this attention may be further limited, resembling as it does the six others in broad particulars. The Chain consists of seven Globes, here again three in which life descends, one which is the turning-point, and three in which it ascends once more. The first and the seventh are of ' subtle mental matter ', the former containing the ' archetypes of the forms to be produced in the Round ', the latter the archetypes ' worked out in detail and perfected '. The second and sixth Globes are similarly related, but consist of ' denser mental

* *Theosophy.* † *Pedigree of Man.*

matter '. The third and fifth are of ' astral matter ',* while the fourth is our familiar Earth.

Around this Chain of seven Globes the vital life-wave sweeps seven times, producing with each round a higher level of evolution. ' Each globe has thus seven periods of activity during a manvantara, each in turn becoming the field of evolving life. Looking at a single globe we find that during the period of its activity seven root-races of humanity evolve on it, together with six other non-human kingdoms interdependent on each other. As these seven kingdoms contain forms at all stages of evolution, as all have higher reaches stretching before them, the evolving forms of one globe pass to another to carry on their growth when the period of activity of the former globe comes to an end, and go on from globe to globe to the end of that round ; they further pursue their course round after round to the close of the seven rounds or manvantaras ; they once again climb onward through manvantara after manvantara till the end of the reincarnations of their planetary chain is reached, when the results of that planetary evolution are gathered up by the planetary Logos. Needless to say that scarcely anything of this evolution is known to us ; only the salient points in the stupendous whole have been indicated by the Teachers.' † Even of the three planetary Chains which preceded the Earth Chain in this Solar System (in the third of which the Moon formed the physical globe) little is known.

When, however, we come gratefully at last to concentrate our attention upon this imperceptible planet which forms our temporary resting-place, we learn that ' three times has evolution swept round the series of globes of which our earth is the densest—three Rounds lie behind us. The fourth sweep has come as far as our earth, which is now evolving under its influence. Minerals, plants, animals, men, all evolve together, but we may confine ourselves to men. Seven root-types of men evolve on our earth during this stage of its life. Theosophists call these types Root-Races, and each has its own special " continent " or configuration of land. The first two Root-Races have disap-

* In our case these two are, somewhat unusually, visible to physical sight, being Mars and Mercury. Humanity came to Earth from Mars ; it is presently to pass on to Mercury.

† *Ancient Wisdom.*

peared. Of the third, the Lemurian, which flourished on the continent of Lemuria, now beneath the Pacific Ocean for the most part, scarcely a pure specimen remains; the negroes are its descendants from mixed marriages. The fourth, the Atlantean, spread over the earth from the continent of Atlantis, which united Western Europe and Africa with Eastern America; it built some of the mightiest civilizations the world has known, and the greater part of the world's inhabitants still belong to it. The fifth, the Aryan, leads humanity to-day. The sixth is in the womb of the future, but its continent is beginning its formation, and will occupy, roughly, the Lemurian site; the islands now being thrown up in the northern Pacific are indications of the commencement of a work which will demand hundreds of thousands of years for its accomplishment. The seventh lies far, far ahead. Each Root-Race divides into seven sub-races; we have the fourth Root-Race divided into the Rmoahal, Tlavatli, Toltec, Turanian, Semitic, Akkadian, and Mongolian sub-races. The fifth Root-Race has, so far, produced five sub-races: the Hindu, Arabian, Iranian, Keltic, and Teutonic; the sixth sub-race* is beginning to show itself in the Unites States.' †

* 'The future of the Theosophical Society is to be the mother, and even the educator, of the child sixth sub-race which already is going through its ante-natal life' (*London Lectures of* 1907, p. 154). But in *The Changing World* (1909), p. 224, we are told that 'it is the great privilege of the Theosophical Society to be the nucleus of the coming *Root*-Race'.

† *Theosophy*. For the appearance of this new sub-race in California, Mrs Besant frequently claims the authority of the American anthropologist Dr Hrdlika. A friend of mine, a Californian biologist and writer with some fifteen years' teaching experience in the State schools, definitely rejects as unwarrantable any such identification of the anticipated Theosophical sub-race with the individuals described by Dr Hrdlika. 'Individuals, precocious and amenable to finer responses than can reach the common subject, are found, certainly. If they appear more frequently in California it may be partly because of a freer life in the fresh air—out of doors the year round—and partly because migrants of such tendency are more apt to reach our farthest West.' These individuals, in his extensive observation, embody 'no common set of qualities or characteristics'—in short, there is no type. He notes, incidentally, that the special classes for these individuals (mentioned by Mrs Besant in support of her claim) exist only in the elementary, not in the high, schools; in the high schools such individuals are, in fact, extremely rare.

Recently, in a letter to *The Observer*, Mr. Leonard Huxley referred to a case of Theosophical 'stretching of irrelevant fact, the methods beloved of quacks and advertisers. The trumpet is blown: a scientific "fact" is paraded:

Each sub-race is given at its birth its own particular World Teacher; this has always been so in the past, and the Theosophical expectation of a new Coming is, therefore, only logical.

There is no such thing in the Theosophical universe as chance; everything is subject to inexorable law, but takes place under the supervision and direction of beings possessing greater and lesser knowledge—which is power—and therefore able to use the universal laws to further the designs of Ishvara or to punish those who frustrate them. The existence of this hierarchy of 'many spiritual Intelligences' forms the third of the five dogmas quoted at the beginning. The Logos creating the cosmos, it is said, brings with Himself the 'fruits of a past cosmos—the mighty spiritual Intelligences who are to be His co-workers and agents in the universe now to be built. Highest of these are "the Seven", often themselves spoken of as Logoi, since each in His place is the centre of a distinct department in the cosmos, as the Logos is the centre of the whole. . . . Under each of the seven secondary Logoi come the descending hierarchies of Intelligences that form the governing body of His kingdom; among these we hear of the Lipika, who are the Recorders of the Karma of that kingdom and of all the entities therein; of the Maharajas or Devarajas, who superintend the working out of karmic law; and of the vast hosts of the Builders, who shape and fashion all forms after the Ideas that dwell in the treasure-house of the Logos, in the Universal Mind, and that pass from Him to the Seven, each of whom plans out His realm under that supreme direction and all-inspiring life, giving to it, at the same time, His own individual colouring.'*

In the Solar System, apparently, each of the seven Logoi presides over one planetary Chain. Skipping over any number of intervening Creative Hierarchies—the details of which would fill a book—and coming once more to earth, we learn that 'the world is divided into areas, each of which has a Master at its head, and He guides its activities, selects some men as His instruments, uses them, lays them quietly aside when useless, seeking ever to inspire, to guide, to attract, to check, but never to dominate the human will. The Great Plan must be carried out, but it is carried out by utilizing free agents, who pursue certain

the simple public, unaware that the "fact" has quite a different bearing, bows down to the supposed authority of "science", and the trick is done.'

* *Ancient Wisdom.*

aims which attract them, power, fame, wealth, and the rest. Where man's aims, if carried out, will forward the Plan, opportunities to rise are placed in his way, and he obtains what he wants, ignorantly accomplishing a little bit of the Plan. "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players"; but the Drama is written by the divine Playwright; men can only choose their parts, limited in their choice by the Karma they have created in their past, that includes their capacities. Further, there are great departments in the government of the world, that includes the whole planet. The administrative department that rules seismic changes, the raising and submerging of continents, the evolution of races, sub-races, and nations, and the like, has among its leading officials the Manus; a Manu is a typical man, and each root-race has its Manu, embodying its type in its highest perfection. The teaching department is headed by the Bodhisattva, or Christ, the Supreme Teacher of Gods and Men; He founds religions directly or through His messengers, and places each under the protection of a Master, He Himself superintending and blessing all. When He becomes a Buddha He leaves the earth, and is succeeded by another as Bodhisattva. These Mighty Beings are the viceregents on our earth of the Supreme Lord, the Logos or manifested God. They are "ministers of His, that do His pleasure". Thus it comes to pass that His world is guided, protected, assisted, as it slowly rolls upward, by the long road of evolution, to his Feet.'*

The protectors and guides with whom we of this world may most readily come into contact (if, that is to say, we are initiated Theosophists), and upon whose authority the Theosophical conception of the universe is accepted, are those commonly known as the Masters. These are 'certain great Beings belonging to our race who have completed Their human evolution, and to whom allusion has already been made as constituting a Brotherhood, and as guiding and forwarding the development of the race. These great Ones, the Masters, voluntarily incarnate in human bodies† in order to form the connecting link between human and superhuman beings, and They permit those who fulfil certain con-

* *Theosophy.*

† 'The Master, as Master, is a man, and the manhood must never be forgotten.'

ditions to become Their disciples, with the object of hastening their evolution and thus qualifying themselves to enter the great Brotherhood, and to assist in its glorious and beneficent work for man.' * These Masters live in various parts of the world. The Master Jesus—whose body for three years provided the 'vehicle' for the incarnate Christ, and who ever since 'has been the Guardian and Shepherd of His Church, guiding, inspiring, disciplining, purifying, century after century'—lives in the mountains of Lebanon, clothed in a Syrian body; others are to be found in Egypt, in Hungary, and—a concentration—in Tibet. It must be noted, however, that the Masters are able to free themselves from their grosser physical bodies, and so to visit anywhere at will. Very soon (we are told) the Christ will once more return incarnate to earth, when the Masters will serve as his disciples to aid His work and spread abroad His message.†

The aim of the individual, the Theosophist would say, should be to develop qualities and powers, to become pupil of a Master, to rise to Mastership, and so to proceed ever upward and on. His reward shall come to him! 'At the end of the seventh race of the seventh round, that is, at the close of our terrene manvantara, our chain will hand on to its successor the fruits of its life; these fruits will be perfected divine men, Buddhas, Manus, Chohans, Masters, ready to take up the work of guiding evolution under the direction of the planetary Logos, with hosts of less evolved entities of every grade of consciousness, who still need physical experience for the perfecting of their divine possibilities. The fifth, sixth, and seventh manvantaras of our chain are still in the womb of the future after this fourth one has closed, and then the planetary Logos will gather up into Himself all the fruits of evolution, and with His children enter on a period of rest and bliss. Of that high state we cannot speak; how at this stage of our evolution could we dream of its unimagined glory; only we dimly know that our glad spirits shall "enter into the joy of the Lord", and, resting in Him, shall see stretching before them boundless ranges of sublime life and love, heights and depths of power and joy, limitless as the One Existence, inexhaustible as the One that IS.' ‡

Even as the universe in the beginning was out-breathed, so

* *Ancient Wisdom.* † *The Masters.* ‡ *Ancient Wisdom.*

now it is in-breathed, until Ishvara vanishes, merging once more into the One Existence, leaving only the memory (Maya) of the universe to serve as the seed from which the next shall be builded, and the human souls whose pilgrimage is even yet not ended to serve as the Monads in this new manvantara.

* * * * *

Two things at least must be evident from even this brief outline of Theosophy ; first, that it is essentially dogmatic,* and second, that it permits no appeal for proof in any ordinary sense of the word. This, with its various implications, ethical, psychological, scientific—upon which there is no need to enlarge, for they depend wholly upon their background, and to doubt that is to doubt all—is the teaching given by the Masters, the teaching which it is alleged has been at the heart of all religions, though often hidden in obscure forms and occult symbols. It *is* the teaching, and that is the beginning and end of the matter for all practical purposes. A certain proof is offered to those who will undergo special preparation (to bring about the necessary 'awakening of the spirit'), but many who have knocked seem to have gone empty away, and one feels that in fact Sinnett stated the essence of the matter when he declared that full proof is only possible to those who have full belief. 'Faith creates its own verification,' said William James pointedly ; and again that 'when a positive intellectual content is associated with a faith-state, it gets invincibly stamped in upon belief'. Certainly no good Theosophist would admit failure of proof as destructive of faith. Theosophy *is* a religion of authority, not drawing its 'facts' in any important degree from deduction from evidence, but simply from direct occult revelation. Even G. B. Butt, Madame Blavatsky's devoted biographer, admits that 'to a large extent one has to join the Theosophical Society, if one joins it at all, on sheer faith' ; and another writer, certainly

* 'By dogma I mean a statement, elaborated by the reason, embodying a truth, or that which is believed to be a truth, and imposing it by authority from outside. . . . It may be the authority of an ancient Church or of some sacred Scripture, or of a man regarded as supreme ; but in any case it is an authority outside the man from whom belief is demanded. And it comes to him with the claim of that authority for his submission ; he must bow to it, accept it as the truth.'—Mrs Besant, *The Immediate Future*.

not antagonistic to Occultism, agrees that 'the evidence for the existence of the "Great White Brotherhood" of Mahatmas, the existence of which Madame Blavatsky asserted, is somewhat feeble. It rests, for the most part, on the statements of Madame Blavatsky, Colonel Olcott, Mr Sinnett, Mr Leadbeater, and others who claim to have seen and communicated with them.' *

Evidence of dependence on revelation, even in connection with minor matters, is abundant. Mrs Besant has more than once declared in connection with her writings and lectures that her 'facts' were revealed by her Master, and that therefore she could not argue about them. Such revelations are, as a rule, granted only to the chosen few disciples, and those less fortunate are for that reason bidden to follow and obey them. Thus C. W. Leadbeater writes of Mrs Besant, first lauding her 'colossal intellect, her unfailing wisdom, her unrivalled eloquence, her splendid forgetfulness of self, her untiring devotion to work for others,' as 'but a small part of her greatness', and declaring her a pupil of the Masters: 'Think how great an honour it is for you that you should be permitted to work under her, for in doing so you are virtually working under Them. Think how watchful you should be to miss no hint which falls from her lips, to carry out exactly whatever instruction she may give you. Remember that because of her position as an Initiate she knows far more than you do; and precisely because her knowledge is occult, given under the seal of Initiation, she cannot share it with you. Therefore, her actions must constantly be governed by considerations of which you have no conceptions. There will be times when you cannot understand her motives, for she is taking into account many things which you cannot see and of which she must not tell you. But whether you understand or not, you will be wise to follow her implicitly, just because she knows. This is no mere supposition on my part, no mere flight of the imagination; I have stood beside your President in the presence of the Supreme Director of evolution on this globe, and I know whereof I speak.' † Seldom indeed does the naked spirit of Catholicism achieve to-day such positive expression, but the constant cry of Theosophy as of official Catholicism is to the

* Lewis Spence: *Encyclopedia of Occultism.*
† *Adyar: The Home of the Theosophical Society.*

believer to bow down before a spiritual superior whose superiority is, in fact, from any external point of view, a matter of pure assumption.

Just in so far as Theosophy confined itself to proclaiming each individual religion simply one pane—cracked and discoloured sometimes—in the dome of many-coloured glass through which shines the white radiance of eternity, it was probably good. So long as individuals remain sufficiently undeveloped to *need* the external support of some dogmatic faith, it is better that they should regard it as expressing an aspect of, rather than an absolute, truth. At least that makes for tolerance, and thus promotes freer individual development. But Theosophy failed when it too erected its own dogma, its own orthodoxy, which alone revealed the whole truth. Studying the past, its founders should have learned the lesson that organization must kill religion, as an Academy kills Art—and for the same reason.*

Having declared it essentially authoritative, there is no need to elaborate its dogmatism. Yet one must note how in its whole account of the constitution of the universe it offers a far higher degree of precision than of proof. It presents its theory complete, detailed, and appeals to evidence mainly as indicative of probability. It does not construct its Divine Wisdom from the religious systems of the past ; instead, it interprets those religions in the light of the Wisdom. The Theosophist always *begins* by taking Theosophy for granted.

Setting aside, however, all question of the acceptability or otherwise of its dogma, granting for the moment that things may indeed be so, it is still true of Theosophy as of every other religion that it fails completely to ' put any purpose into the universe '. It is, of course, at fault not in its failure but in its

* Huxley once said : ' Science commits suicide when it adopts a creed.' That is true of all religions—certainly of Theosophy. Theosophy is open to criticism as a religion, just like any other, and in fact on much the same grounds. A study from the point of view of another Catholicism exists in *Principles of Theosophy*, by Theodore Mainage (Sheed & Ward, 1927). Here, criticizing its philosophical basis, the author accuses Theosophy of having so mingled and muddled the various forms of pantheism as to make nonsense of them all ; his book is not unamusing if one has patience to attend to controversy between this Roman Catholic pot and the Theosophist Catholic kettle.

pretence at success. 'Why did God emanate or create the world?' Mrs Besant asks, re-telling an old legend, and quotes the answer to this interesting problem as 'containing a profound truth': 'Because the Supreme Love, God, desired to be loved'*—a conception surely as pitiful and purposeless as that of a child who, lonely, lacking a playmate, carries on a conversation with himself in two voices! Yet Theosophy has no better answer—and cannot have. The world's stress and strain, beauty, joy, pain—more pain than joy—achievement, failure, can all these, through however many worlds one extends them, at whatever height one sets the final goal, add one jot to infinity? Theosophy evades this ultimate problem; its system of reward for good and punishment for ill living is precisely that of any other religion, but the purpose of ultimate absolute merit it does not begin to explain. It is easier to give God a name and take it all for granted. Theosophy, in fact, takes a lot too much for granted, as when it posits the essential goodness and justice of the universe. Few things are insisted upon so much by Mrs Besant as the *moral necessity* of reincarnation, and she even goes so far as to assert that 'in dropping reincarnation from its beliefs, the modern world has deprived God of his justice and has bereft man of his security'.† These are extremely debatable statements, but even if they be accepted we may still ask—Why not? What right have we to believe in God's justice or Man's security? This easy acceptance of a theory because it 'rationalizes' a number of problems, because it permits of an assurance that in the end the wicked shall suffer and the righteous rejoice, is following a mere will-of-the-wisp. There may be justice in the universe, there may be purpose, there may be—in more than a purely causal sense—law. We cannot know. If any final purpose, justice, law, do exist, they can be nothing to us. We can, rationally, perceive nothing of them, and so we cannot serve them. The only justice we can know is human justice, and if divine justice existed it might seem the cruellest injustice. Perhaps we do suffer in this life for wrongs committed in a previous life—knowing nothing of that previous life there is no justice in our suffering. We live our lives within our known limits, and beyond them we cannot step. As individuals we

* *Inner Government of the World.* † *Ancient Wisdom.*

may achieve some recognition—not knowledge—of that infinite and eternal reality we call God; it is purely individual and mystical. As men in a world of men we must be concerned with men. Only when men cease contemplating what they owe to God, and commence to consider what they owe to men, will the first step towards real justice and happiness be made. Only when men sweep out of their minds all hope and desire for the intellectualization or organization of the mystical impulse will the first step towards a true religious attitude be achieved.

In the meantime we can but declare these appeals to justice and righteousness wholly irrelevant. God may exist, but He is infinite. Man is finite. Rational knowledge of one by the other is impossible, and no other knowledge is either communicable (except as poetry) or capable of organization.*

But again, this apart also, Theosophical justice, as revealed in reincarnation, is extremely questionable. 'Predestination in its most offensive form is the alternative of reincarnation',† declares Mrs Besant, but it is not difficult to charge Theosophy with involving a predestination no less rigid. Since 'nothing can be longed for that is not already in the purposes of the Will' ‡ inequality necessarily involves injustice. It is easy to declare that 'man remains ever free at the centre,' § but when the universe of which he is a part is but the 'fruitage' of infinite preceding universes, when he himself carries the burden of the karma of infinite previous existences, so that all things in the world are determined by what has gone before, it is difficult to discern this freedom. 'The karma brings to you everything to which you have a right; and if what is called an injustice is done you, it is only the balancing up of an ancient wrong. *You think people can hurt you. Then you do not believe in the law of Karma.* It is your own hand that strikes you, and no one else's. No one can injure you or wrong you, no one can commit any injustice against you. The whole of that which you suffer comes out of your past. *These people are mere puppets who come*

* 'The essence of Theosophy,' writes Mrs Besant in *The Riddle of Life and how Theosophy Answers It* (1911), 'is the fact that man, being himself divine, can know the Divinity whose life he shares.' But what is the warrant of his being divine? His ability, presumably, to know divinity! This is playing with words.

† *Ancient Wisdom.* ‡ *Esoteric Christianity.* § *Ancient Wisdom.*

forward to claim the debt that you have to pay.'* These italicized sentences are surely final—free-will necessarily involves the power to injure as to benefit others, irrespective of justice or injustice.

'There are many people,' Mrs Besant has written, 'who cannot pass through life happily and contentedly unless they possess some definite knowledge, knowledge which is precise, knowledge which enables them to understand themselves as well as the world around them. They cannot remain satisfied to be living in an unintelligible world.' † This is wholly true of her. All her life has been a quest for such knowledge, for a faith which would give her intellectual satisfaction, and, having failed until then, she seems to have been determined to find it in Theosophy. She has, apparently, done so, but that neither proves her or Theosophy right nor that an intellectual satisfaction *is* possible. She began in the Catholic faith of orthodox English Christianity; she seems destined to end in a faith which, if she herself has assisted to create its orthodoxy, is not less Catholic. But the world moves, and increasingly will move, towards a genuine Protestantism, a freedom from forms and dogmas, a self-realization, a mystical (that is, a poetic) acceptance of final death as the condition and complement of life, and a deeper realization of reality gained by acquiescence in mortality, the knowledge that life *is* the play, not simply the prologue.

* *The Changing World.* † *Man's Life in This and Other Worlds.*

What has the paraphernalia of historical evidences to do with a spiritual need? The disputes between one Church and another are insignificant beside the desire of the human soul for the comfort of religion, and ridiculous in comparison with the nature of the reality which makes that refuge to be desired, and makes it for many as impossible as it is desirable.

J. Middleton Murry

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